THE INVISIBLE HOST

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BY

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AND

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TO

J. W. D.

THE INVISIBLE HOST

CHAPTER ONE

"THAT makes thirty-seven words," said the girl.

"Will you read the telegram again?" came the voice over the wire.

She read: "Congratulations stop plans afoot for small surprise party in your honor Bienville penthouse next Saturday eight o'clock stop all sub rosa big surprise stop maintain secrecy stop promise you most original party ever staged in New Orleans Signed Your host."

"That's correct. Send the message to each of the eight addresses."

"The eight telegrams," said the girl, "will cost three dollars and thirty-six cents."

Thirteen quarters and three nickels banged and clicked into the coin-box. "Thank you," said the girl.

From the other end of the line she heard the click of the receiver.

"Gee," she remarked to the girl at the next telephone, "but that guy had a spooky voice."

"Maybe he's an undertaker."

"No, he's having a party," she answered, as she punched out the message on the keyboard before her.

Fifteen minutes later eight yellow envelopes were briskly on their way toward their eight destinations.

Mrs. Gaylord Chisholm tore open her yellow envelope with slim aristocratic fingers and read the message twice. A puzzled line came between her eyebrows, then she smiled amusedly.

Under the pale lights of her boudoir Margaret Chisholm had the air of one of those ancient queens whose sculptured profiles look disdainfully down upon posterity. There was a gesture of empire in the very way she touched a flame to the end of her cigarette and held up the telegram to read it again through the blue plumes of smoke.

CONGRATULATIONS STOP PLANS AFOOT FOR SMALL SURPRISE PARTY IN YOUR HONOR BIENVILLE PENTHOUSE NEXT SATURDAY EIGHT OCLOCK STOP ALL SUB ROSA BIG SURPRISE STOP MAINTAIN SECRECY STOP PROMISE YOU MOST ORIGINAL PARTY EVER STAGED IN NEW ORLEANS

YOUR HOST

What a silly telegram—and yet it was rather clever, thought Margaret. Somebody appeared to be challenging her own position as originator of the city's most amusing parties. Margaret smiled and considered.

Of course it was not necessary to explain to anyone acquainted with the social rivalries of the city that Mrs. Gaylord Chisholm really deserved congratulations for the calm fashion in which she had placed the stamp of her disapproval on the season's only questionable débutante by omitting Catherine Slamon from the list of guests at her annual débutante ball. It was curious, Margaret had reflected afterwards, how much of an impression that had made. The state of society had become appalling; a few years ago nobody would have dreamed of accepting the daughter of an Irish politician into the heart of the Mardi Gras festivities, no matter how rich and philanthropic her heavy-jowled father might be. But everybody had accepted her, and she had danced gayly through the Carnival until the night of the Chisholm ball. Margaret had discussed it beforehand with Jason Osgood, whose daughter was also a débutante that year. The result had been that when the guests arrived at Margaret's famous ball

for the season's débutantes, Catherine Slamon had simply not been there.

And so it was that at the party Saturday night, Margaret told Dr. Murray Chambers Reid that she had thought he was the sender of the telegram, congratulating her on her successful snub of the Slamons. Dr. Reid was too consciously blue-blooded not to admire Margaret for that; and besides, Margaret informed Dr. Reid lest he feel too flattered, the wording of the telegram had sounded to her like a savant's effort to be facetious.

That was what Margaret was to say Saturday night. For the present she simply folded up the telegram and laughed to herself as she screwed her cigarette in a bowl of sandalwood cinders.

Dr. Murray Chambers Reid carefully pushed back the pile of university records on his desk and tore open the telegram his secretary had brought in.

Much of Dr. Reid's reputation in the cool academic circles where he was reverenced was due to the fact that he never gave the impression that he was being told something for the first time. He glanced at the telegram and glanced up to say, "No answer, Miss Ashmere," but as the door closed behind her his face relaxed into an enigmatic frown.

CONGRATULATIONS STOP PLANS AFOOT FOR SMALL PARTY . . .

Of course, Dr. Reid knew it had been rather clever of him to have young Henry Abbott quietly retire from the faculty when Abbott showed an unmistakable tendency to preach subversive social theories in his classes. But very few persons knew why young Abbott had left the university after so short a time; and one really didn't proclaim the inner creakings of a great institution by celebrations. Only two or three special friends of the university had found excuse to congratulate Dr. Reid on the efficiency with which he had once more cleared its corridors of turbulent doctrines. These were men who knew the good work he was doing, such as Jason Osgood.

And so when he arrived at the party Saturday night, Dr. Reid was to tell Jason Osgood in an aside why he had thought Mr. Osgood had sent the telegram. He was to add that he had thought it a wise precaution on Mr. Osgood's part to sign himself simply "Your host," so as not to give the inquisitive an inkling that it was Jason Osgood who had endowed the chair of economics and who took a fatherly interest in what was taught from it.

Dr. Reid was to say all that Saturday night. He knew it now as he put the telegram into his breast pocket and rang for his secretary. Dr. Reid easily made up his mind in advance.

As his secretary flounced through the door, Jason Osgood, annoyed at having a wire interrupt him at this time, frowned impatiently, pushed aside his report to the stockholders and tore open the envelope of the third telegram.

At the party Saturday night Mr. Osgood was to charge Peter Daly with sending the telegram. He was to explain how exasperated he had been upon receiving it—it was not soothing to be interrupted in his office by cryptic messages from artistic youngsters of the French Quarter. Still, Mr. Osgood was to say, he had reflected that it had been rather important to have financed the Civic Forum, and he hadn't been surprised that Peter had planned to celebrate the Osgood Foundation. "Then, of course," Mr. Osgood was to add, "I wanted to congratulate you on having your book dramatized on Broadway. So I decided to run up for a while after a meeting in my office."

That was what Mr. Osgood was to say Saturday night. Now he read the telegram, and put it aside

as he turned back to his report. Mr. Osgood's office was in the shining new Bienville Building, but he had not yet had a look at the penthouse, twenty-two stories above the street. He remembered that the architects had said it would be the smartest thing of its kind in town.

Peter Daly had been browsing among the bookshops along Royal Street, and found his message on the mantelpiece when he came in. He deposited a newspaper-wrapped bundle of books on the floor and opened the fourth telegram.

"It took me three full minutes to decide on the sender," Peter was to report at the party Saturday night, "but after running down the list of my friends I remembered Sylvia, and I was certain it was she. You see, Sylvia was always a pal of mine—she used to read my stuff and say it was good back in the days when I hardly believed it was good myself, and it seemed just like Sylvia to want to give me a party during these first days back home. I suppose I was a little bit silly—seeing one's first play on Broadway does go to one's head."

That was to be Peter's explanation Saturday night. But now when he read the telegram he

simply went out on his balcony and looked down over the strange dilapidated beauty of the old French Quarter and listened to the chime of bells in the dust-gray cathedral tower.

"Telegram, Miss Sylvia."

"Thanks, Chad." Sylvia Inglesby lifted her sleek golden head to look at her office boy, and smiled in spite of herself. "Chad, how often have I told you not to chew gum in the office?"

"Oh, gee, Miss Sylvia, I'm sorry." He fished a slip of paper from the wastebasket and wrapped up the gum. "That all right?" he asked as he put the ball back into the basket.

"Yes, I suppose so. And Chad, tell Miss Worthington to have those briefs ready by five o'clock. Mr. Lindsay will be in then."

"Yessum." Chad's head bobbed and he grinned at her as he went out.

Sylvia smiled after him as she slipped her fingers under the flap of the fifth telegram. She took a foolish delight in the adoration of the office boy as being a typical tribute to how much and yet how little she looked like a lawyer.

Her face lit again with amusement as she read the telegram:

CONGRATULATIONS . . . YOUR HOST

"But it was so exactly like you, Tim," she was to whisper at the party Saturday night.

Sylvia was an admirable lawyer, logical and coldly inspired. There were several of her clients who had become in the course of time her warmest friends, and perhaps the closest friend she had among them was Tim Slamon, the politician whose bulbous, pugnacious face belied his very real intellect. Sylvia was fond of Tim, and Tim had a high regard for Sylvia's ability.

"But I wondered at the time," Tim was to hear her say Saturday night, "if it was wise of you to celebrate with a party. Of course it was a triumph for us both when we managed to adduce proof that Cosgrave was legally entitled to run for mayor after all the mud slung by Osgood's faction. I couldn't help thinking it was good of you to give me a party."

Sylvia was thinking about that Osgood-Slamon battle as she tucked away the telegram. She knew her methods there had smacked considerably of the shyster. She did not think she would have strained so many points for anybody but Tim. Good old Tim.

It was characteristic of Tim Slamon that he never chewed his cigars. As he came back to his office on his return from City Hall the blue smoke enwreathed his head till he looked like one of a race of funny Celtic genii advancing in a cloud.

Two telegrams lay on his desk. The first proved to be a message from one of the out-of-town directors of the Art Craftsmen's Club thanking Mr. Slamon for his public-spirited work in getting the Craftmen's Club an appropriation from city funds. Tim read it and put it aside with a benign nod. He approved of the Craftsmen's Club. Not that he had ever had time to learn much about pictures, pottery and sculpture, but it was run by an amusing group and its school had achieved a reputation that a civic leader of Tim's caliber could not overlook. Young Abbott, reflected Tim, had probably nudged the board of directors and suggested this telegram of thanks. Abbott was a nice fellow, in spite of his recent mysterious elimination from the university faculty after a teaching career of four months; and he would naturally be interested in the welfare of the Club, for he had just been awarded first prize in their spring exhibit.

Tim opened the other telegram.

Meeting young Abbott on Saturday night, Tim

was to explain that he had thought Abbott must have sent the congratulating telegram. It had seemed so obviously the work of a harebrain like Abbott. "I thought you were trying to be mysterious, and it seemed rather fun to fall in with you," Tim said. "I thought I'd just come as directed and pretend I had no idea who the host was and be surprised when you confessed over the cocktails."

Tim reflected as he put aside the telegram that it was a good thing he had had long experience in learning how to please everybody.

Henry L. Abbott, known in the lopsided familiarity of the Quarter as Hank, sat in a palmy patio on Royal Street painting the crooked stairway that led to the balcony when the ancient negress who kept his apartment in order brought him the seventh telegram. She jabbered in her soft, pleasant and unprintable Creole patter that it had just arrived. Hank, who never understood more than half she told him, said, "All right." As she retreated he leaned over and studied the dash of blue he had put into the shadow on the stair. It seemed too blue. Hank knew considerably more about painting than he did about communism; in

fact, he was given to wondering what he had said in his classroom lectures that had sounded communistic to Dr. Reid. He frowned over the blue shadow and tore open the telegram.

He read it several times, chuckling. Hank had been in particularly good humor since he had won the prize at the spring exhibit.

"Jean," said Hank to the blue-shaded stairway. "Jean."

At the party Saturday night Hank was to confess to Jean that she was the only possible sender of the telegram who had occurred to him. "It had such a Hollywood flavor," he was to say. "And it seemed so like you to remember in the midst of your flashing career that I had won a bit of a prize myself."

Hank stuffed the telegram into his pocket and returned to his survey of the shadow on the blue stairway.

But Jean, beautiful, misty, diaphanous Jean Trent of the talkies, back home in New Orleans on a holiday, said that she did not think about Hank when she received the eighth telegram. She said Saturday night that as soon as she had read it she had thought about Margaret Chisholm.

Jean had gone from a stock company to Broadway and thence to Hollywood, and there she had made three talkies that had placed her name in shining letters on the perishable Hollywood roll of fame. But Jean was lonely in Hollywood. New Orleans was her home town, and like others who have been bred in the magic green and gold of New Orleans Jean came back as often as she could.

Jean's newest picture had opened in New Orleans the day before, and Jean had made a personal appearance; this telegram was only one of many that congratulated her. Margaret had promised before Jean came back to New Orleans on this visit to give her a party to which all her most delightful friends would be invited; so nobody was surprised Saturday night when Jean said she had thought the telegram came from Margaret. She had never known Margaret to send an invitation by wire, she confessed, but she had hardly thought of that, for like other intimate friends of Mrs. Chisholm she was used to her commands.

CHAPTER TWO

JEAN TRENT was the last to arrive. She stepped off the elevator at the twenty-first floor of the Bienville Building and stood a moment in the hall, where an arrow pointed the way to the roof and a crusted light made the flight of circular stairs visible. Jean glanced at herself in the plate glass of the elevator door and smiled, reflecting that the sort of gowns one could afford to buy on a talkie contract really did make a difference. She turned her head, watching the light glance on her lacquer-bright black hair, and fluffed out a bit of her mauve drapery before she left the elevator door to climb the stairs. The stairway was but dimly lighted, and at the top of the steps Jean stood a moment in the little hall, hesitating. Facing her was a great door, heavily carved. There was something depressing about the dim light and the crooked shadows on the carving; she felt herself shiver as she crossed the hall and knocked.

The door was so massive in appearance that Jean felt as if she was standing under a fortress.

She lifted the heavy silver knocker, and almost immediately the great door swung back on stealthy hinges, as silently and as heavily as the door of a vault. A tall butler with white hair stood aside to let her pass. A little gasp of surprise and delight escaped her as the door closed. She had stepped into a stone-paved walk, walled on either side; and as she came to the turn she entered a flagged and flowered patio, open to the sky, a reproduction of the famous old courtyards of the Quarter. There were palms and flowers and marble benches in the patio, which seemed to extend on all sides of the penthouse. The penthouse stood like a bungalow in the midst of a garden, and around the patio, insuring its privacy, was a high wall, covered with vines that swung lightly in the wind. She was approaching another door, evidently the entrance to the penthouse. Jean gave the butler her wrap and went in eagerly.

He had opened the door into a vast bright room full of familiar people who greeted her in unison.

"My dear Jean!" exclaimed Mrs. Gaylord Chisholm. "Is this your party?"

"So it's you who are responsible for this," said Jason Osgood.

"Your roof garden is charming!" said Dr. Murray Chambers Reid.

"Wait a minute!" she cried laughing, putting out her hands as if to ward off the cataract of words. "I don't understand you a bit."

She laughed again, that light frothy laugh of Jean Trent that had bubbled from Hollywood around the world. "Please!" she said. "Why are you thanking me?"

She looked at them puzzled, her hands caught in the adorable gesture of questioning that a million fans knew so well.

"But Jean," said Henry L. Abbott, "you aren't our hostess to-night?"

"Why of course not, Hank. Don't be silly. Isn't it Margaret's party?"

A sudden fountain of merriment broke and rose around her.

"We told you so, Margaret," said Peter Daly, gayly.

Jean stood still a minute, inquiring, charming Jean in her fluffy mauve dress and her glossy hair and her eyes the gray of storm clouds. Then she shrugged a shoulder, puckered her lips and crossed to a big chair. "I think you are the rudest people I ever saw in my whole life," she said.

"Aren't we, though?" came Sylvia's famous voice, bright and thin as a new dime. Standing against the heavy dark drape of a window Sylvia looked like a Valkyrie, white and gold and strong. "I think so too. Somebody tell Jean what the fun's about."

"Let somebody tell who knows, then," said Tim Slamon, sinking into the nearest chair. "I'm no good at crossword puzzles or chess combinations or any of those things."

"You tell her, Hank," said Sylvia.

"All right. Be quiet, you hoodlums." Hank Abbott took the middle of the floor and stood facing Jean while the others dispersed themselves more or less noisily around the room. He waited, with his characteristic insouciance that had once caused Sylvia to remark that for Hank to take trouble learning a useful occupation would have been superfluous, as he was so perfectly an end in himself. Hank glanced around at them, at Mrs. Chisholm's black velvet elegance, at the gold and ivory presence of Sylvia, at Jean, blent of flowers and incense in some purple twilight of the gods; he looked at Peter the playwright and thence to the vast Irish personality of Tim Slamon and the moneyed aggressiveness of Jason Osgood, and his

eyes rested an instant on Dr. Murray Chambers Reid, that complete academician.

"Whoever he is," said Hank slowly, "our host has gathered together a singularly invigorating company. Here are eight guests, not one of whom belongs to that species of giggling half-wit almost impossible to avoid in polite society. I should say that our host has done a beguiling piece of social selection."

"We all know we're charming people, Hank," said Margaret, lighting a cigarette with acute precision, "but is this an oration or a sort of hint to Jean why we were rude to her?"

"Sorry if I bore you," said Hank unruffled. "However, I think it will clarify all our minds if we put the situation under my microscopic observation and take a look at it."

He looked around the room. It was a black and silver apartment of geometric decoration and bright many-angled furniture. The walls were silver, lined with black, and long acute silver angles thrust their way up the black curtains. The chairs and tables projected their corners into space with modernistic impertinence; the radio at one end of the room had a skyscraper cabinet, black with silver dials. It was a smart room, an irritating

room; a room that gave one the feeling that one was not quiet suitably dressed for the occasion. Facing the radio was a pair of sliding doors leading into the dining room, and at Hank's left another door, on which a silver Leda gazed up at a vast black swan, opened into a bedroom.

"Jean," said Hank, "how did you happen to come here to-night?"

"Why—I got a telegram yesterday that said 'Congratulations,' and invited me to a party here, and was signed 'Your host.' "

"Precisely. Now what is peculiar about this little party is that there is no host. There are only guests of honor. Every one of us here received a telegram yesterday that contained, as nearly as our memories serve us, the same words. It being Lent, and New Orleans being the kind of town it is, we were all free to come. None of us had any trouble proving our conceit by guessing just what was the great achievement he was being congratulated on. So anyway, here we are, and the host hasn't shown up."

"But—" Jean hesitated. "Maybe it's a trick party. Maybe he'll come in costume, or drop through the ceiling, or come up the dumb-waiter——"

"Jean's been to Hollywood, Hollywood, Hollywood," sang out Jason Osgood, waving his cigar in the air to mark time.

"Be still," ordered Margaret, spanking his cheeks with her fan. "So you see, Jean, everybody came thinking one of the others had invited him. Jason and I were the first. We met downstairs and came up together. I'd thought Dr. Reid sent the telegram."

"This is fun," cried Jean. "What was your great achievement?"

Margaret caught sight of Tim across the room and smiled blandly. Margaret had spent the twenty years since her marriage in perfecting her art of never being disconcerted.

"Something silly, my dear. Another illustration of Hank's colossal conceit idea. Tim was staring at her, his shrewd eyes narrowed, and Sylvia was giving her the rapt gaze which indicates that one is being polite without paying the slightest attention to what is being said, but Margaret went on cheerfully. "After everybody got here—all but you—we compared notes and discovered that I was the only one present who had not been suspected by somebody of giving the party. So everybody accused me of being hostess——"

"Aren't you really, Margaret?" asked Osgood.

"No, Jason, no, no, no. I've never had such an idea in my life. Then when you came, Jean, a bit late, we thought it was you. But when you walked in and said, 'I thought the telegram was from Margaret——' "

Jean laughed aloud—oh, Jean's miraculous laugh!

"I love it, I love it," she cried. She sprang up like a child and pirouetted on her satin toes. "It's perfectly delicious. Maybe there are other people —dozens of them—all brought here by that telegram." Her voice lowered sepulchrally, and she shook her finger in warning. "Maybe somebody sent the telegrams to everybody in town, to prove to himself that among half a million supposedly hard-headed people there wasn't one who didn't always think he was doing great stunts. I adore it!"

"Are you implying that there'll soon be half a million people trying to get in here?" asked Tim Slamon with a grin. "Since we've bitten, suppose we move and make room for them."

"Let's don't go without finding out if we're going to get so much as a drink," murmured Hank. "Let's call the butler and ask him if this unseen

host person left any refreshments about, or if it's *all* a fake."

"That's an idea," said Peter Daly. "Is there a bell somewhere?"

"This looks like it," said Margaret, indicating a cord between the front windows. Peter rang, and the silent, impeccable butler appeared through the sliding doors, which he closed behind him.

"Tell me," said Hank, "—er—what are you called?"

"Hawkins, sir."

"Hawkins," repeated Tim. "It sounds like a drawing-room comedy."

"It is a drawing-room comedy," said Sylvia. "That's the point of the party."

"Hawkins," Hank was saying, "this is, as you may be aware, a rather unusual sort of entertainment. We think we could understand it better if we had a glass of something."

"I was about to serve cocktails when you rang, sir."

"Excellent," said Hank.

"But I thought we were going to ask him about our host," objected Jason Osgood as the black and silver doors slid together.

"Now, Jason," said Hank. "Jason, forever too

busy shearing the lambs of their golden fleeces to recall that it is sometimes good to waste time over the gentle amenities of life. The time for questions at a party is after the drinks are in sight, not before. Right now, for instance," he added, as Hawkins reappeared with the tray.

"He has furnished my kind of cigarettes," observed Sylvia, selecting one from a three-cornered box on a little table at one side. "Hawkins! Don't leave yet. We want to get some information."

"Certainly, madam," said Hawkins obediently.

Dr. Reid shifted his position with a deep breath of boredom, as eloquent as if he had expressed his exasperation at the type of efficient femininity that has a passion for managing things.

"Well, Hawkins," said Hank, "this promises to be a charming evening, but there seems to be a dark horse as yet unaccounted for. We wanted to inquire——"

"You'll take all night inquiring, Hank," broke in Peter. "Let Sylvia ask him."

Sylvia smoothed a fold across her white satin lap.

"Hawkins, who is giving this party?"

"That I cannot tell you, madam."

"Why can't you tell us? Do you mean that it's a secret?"

"I mean I don't know," said Hawkins.

"But Hawkins," cried Jean, "you must know! Somebody employed you."

"Your host has left me instructions to tell you all I know about him," said Hawkins imperturbably. "I was engaged with the cook and two waitresses who will attend you at dinner, by telephone from the Castelden Agency. Someone inquired if there was an experienced butler at liberty named Hawkins or Tompkins——"

"It *is* a drawing-room comedy!" exclaimed Peter.

"I do not know, sir. At any rate, written instructions were mailed to me. I was to come here to-night, where I should find everything in readiness for serving dinner to eight guests. On the table in the pantry I was to find an envelope containing instructions for the entertainment of the guests. Everything is to be done by schedule. My orders are very much in detail. Your host has planned, if I may say so, a very pleasant evening. Your chef is the premier chef of the restaurant of M. Lamatte, lately closed. The assistants are setting the oysters Rockefeller just now."

"May I ask," said Dr. Reid, "if this mysterious host is a man or a woman?"

"That I do not know, sir."

"But is he—she—it going to be here at all?" asked Peter.

"I was further instructed to say, sir, that you will hear from your host later in the evening."

"What a party!" exclaimed Margaret.

Hank grinned. "Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of the party."

"This gets intriguing," said Peter.

"But it's delightful," said Sylvia. "I wouldn't have missed it. That's all, Hawkins. Now who on earth——"

"None of my acquaintances, I am sure," said Dr. Reid, "could have evolved so preposterous an idea."

"But do you think we ought to stay?" asked Osgood. "There's something——"

"Of course we'll stay," said Tim. "I'm with Sylvia. I wouldn't miss it."

"To be sure we'll stay," nodded Dr. Reid, "now that we are here."

"Dr. Reid, the always immovable," commented Hank lazily.

Dr. Reid shot him an unpleasant glance, but Margaret Chisholm flashed into the breach with a tactful change of subject. She went to sit by the professor. Hawkins came in again with cocktails. When he had passed the tray he glanced at the little black clock on the silver wall, crossed the room and knelt before the radio cabinet, directly opposite the sliding doors.

"Don't turn on that thing—they make such a racket," Peter objected.

"If you will pardon me, sir," said Hawkins smoothly,"your host has told me explicitly to turn on the radio, tuning in with a specified station, at this time. It is part of his program for the evening." He turned the dials.

"Oh, well," said Peter.

"Quite right," said Dr. Reid, looking up from his conversation with Mrs. Chisholm.

"Dear Dr. Reid," murmured Sylvia aside to Tim. "The immovable object as yet unchallenged by the irresistible force."

"Station WSMB, New Orleans, America's most interesting city," came from the radio. "To-night, ladies and gentlemen, by special arrangement with the American Broadcasting Company, we are to

have the pleasure of hearing the concert to be played by the Quinby Orchestra in Carnegie Hall, New York."

"I'm glad we're going to hear that," said Jean. "I remember seeing in the paper it was going to be broadcast to-night."

The music pealed from the radio. The party began to relax. Insensibly, they let Mrs. Gaylord Chisholm assume her familiar rôle of perfect hostess. She moved graciously and unhurriedly about the room; one would have thought it was her party, a particularly diverting party. She paused a minute directly under the chandelier and smiled at Tim Slamon, who gave her an oddly crooked smile in return.

"She's still good looking," Tim remarked in a grudging aside to Sylvia.

Margaret never avoided the light that would delineate the remorseless details of forty-six forceful years on her face; she was too magnificent, too sure of herself to employ juvenile subterfuges, and she possessed the ripe charm and the austere elegance that youth can only hope to achieve. She embodied so superbly the qualities of an aristocrat that it was difficult to remember that she had merely married one.

But that was true; Margaret had spent her girlhood in a little town on the bayous, and not until young Gaylord Chisholm had gone hunting one fall had he seen this magnificent girl who became the mistress of the Chisholm clan and the arbiter of the set in which it moved. All her life Margaret Chisholm had followed an imperious apparition of power. Reaching for power she had come out of the bayous, and now after twenty years she was serene, passionately sure. Tim looked at her; at length he rose and stood leaning on the radio cabinet, apparently listening to the music. Jason Osgood passed him to get matches from the table in the corner. The shrewd harshness of Tim's eyes arrested him.

"Hello, Jason," said Tim.

Osgood turned.

"This is the first occasion in a long time that we've met where etiquette requires that we shouldn't call each other names, Jason."

Osgood shrugged.

"There's no reason for you to want to call me names now," he said. "Not after you and your sweet little shyster got Cosgrave into the race for mayor."

"We won't speak of Sylvia," said Tim

brusquely. "I was about to suggest that you might feel pleasant toward me after you and Margaret so elegantly insulted my daughter."

Osgood looked at him narrowly and said nothing.

"I suppose it is unnecessary to tell you," said Tim slowly, "that if I had known you were going to be here to-night I shouldn't have come."

"I believe you. I don't think you enjoy the pleasure of my conversation any more than I enjoy yours. Unfortunately, neither of us can leave gracefully."

Osgood walked on toward the table where the matches were lying. Tim turned to examine a figurine of a skater on a cabinet near him.

The music from the radio swelled and rose in an exquisite crescendo.

"How beautiful that is!" murmured Jean as if to herself. She sat on a broad low sofa alone, listening.

"Do you like it so much?" asked a voice at her side.

She looked up.

"Good evening, Peter," she said coldly.

Peter Daly stood looking down at her. "I am not going to stay and annoy you," he said with a

bitter one-sided smile. "I simple wanted to assure you that I did not know you were going to be here when I came to this apartment. If I had, I should have stayed at home."

Jean's hands clenched themselves on her knees till the knuckles showed white.

"Is that all you have to say?"

"Quite."

"Then would you mind talking to someone else, please?"

"Not at all. Don't look as if you were afraid of me. It has been so long since I sat in the same room with you that I thought——"

"I know how to behave," she said evenly. "This is a party, you know."

"So it is," agreed Peter, and walked away.

Jean pushed back her tumble of short dark curls and shivered. She felt a hand on her shoulder, and looking up, she saw Sylvia.

"May I sit down, Jean?"

"But of course. How well you look, Sylvia. I haven't had a chance to talk to you since I've been at home."

"No. I wonder if you'll let me talk about what's none of my business?"

"It's all right. What is it?"

"Peter."

"Sylvia, I thought you were above that."

"What?"

"I know you're his lawyer. But I didn't think you'd take advantage of a party to win me over."

"I wouldn't, Jean. I am not trying to win you over. All I was going to say was this. You've come to a party, and so has Peter. Neither of you could have known the other was to be here. Won't you stop behaving like a savage?"

Jean smiled in spite of herself. "Sylvia, as a lawyer I loathe you, but I like you immensely as a person."

"You're a dear child, Jean, but you are hard."

"Harder than you, I believe."

"I don't know. But it seems so incongruous in you."

"How old are you, Sylvia?" asked Jean abruptly.

"You won't tell?"

"Cross my heart."

"Thirty-four."

"Sylvia, you're amazing."

"Certainly, dear. That's my business. If I weren't amazing I couldn't pay my rent."

Jean laughed. Sylvia rose. "I must go be so-

ciable to Dr. Reid. Remember, dear, be a lady."

The sliding doors opposite the radio opened noiselessly, and Hawkins announced dinner. The dining room, with the doors open to their full extent, was virtually one with the room they left, and the radio was in full view from the table. It was a round table, with place cards adroitly arranged so that Tim sat between Sylvia and Peter, and Margaret on the other side, between Osgood and Dr. Reid. The music from the radio filled the room, but not loudly enough to spoil conversation. As they went through the doorway Hank found himself walking by Dr. Reid.

"I haven't seen you in some time, Dr. Reid," he said.

"No."

"I probably shouldn't have come if I'd known you were to be here."

"No?"

"You disapprove of me so thoroughly."

"Is it necessary to discuss that here?"

"Not at all," said Hank genially. "If you aren't embarrassed, I'm not."

They went in with the others. Hank found himself between Jean and Sylvia, and Dr. Reid was between Margaret and Jean. Before they sat down

Hawkins was handing around more cocktails.

Peter held up his glass.

There was a sudden spatter of rain in the patio. A gust of sharp spring wind lifted the silver-slashed black curtains.

"Pleasant evening he picked for a party!" commented Peter. "Shut the windows, Hawkins. I suppose that we drink to our unaccountable host and then sit down to his dinner. He seems not to have set a place for himself."

They drank, all but Sylia, who stood looking curiously at the glass in her hand.

A stab of lightning cut the black sky outside and the curtains rose and struggled against the storm. The candle flames on the table bent in the wind and streamed out like ribbons. Hawkins closed the windows and went out. Sylvia still stared at the glass she was holding.

"Queer, isn't it," she said slowly, "that all these glasses should be blood-red?"

CHAPTER THREE

"DAMNED queer," said Hank. "But it's all queer."

Sylvia shrugged. "To our host, then."

They sat down, rather stiffly. Another stroke of lightning cracked the sky outside and touched the blood-red glasses with points of light.

"Has it occurred to you," asked Sylvia, looking meditatively at a black olive in her fingers, "that this host person might be one of us?"

The rain beat on the roof. It was loud in the pause that followed her question. They heard a palm tree creaking in the wind; a fronded branch tapped weirdly on the window glass.

"That's a lawyer," said Hank admiringly. "I confess it hadn't occurred to me."

"But how could it be one of us?" asked Margaret. "We all got telegrams inviting us here."

"We all say we did," amended Sylvia. "But one of us may have sent telegrams to the other seven, or to himself. It's an intriguing possibility."

"I'm beginning to look suspiciously at everybody," said Tim. "I know I had a telegram. I thought it must be from Hank."

"I thought mine was from Jean," said Hank.

"It's beginning to sound like a mystery," said Osgood. "Did you invent this party, Margaret?"

"I've told you a dozen times that I didn't. I wish I had."

"It seems to me the kind that a woman would invent," said Dr. Reid.

"Maybe," said Osgood,

"Personally," said Hank, "I believe if any of us is responsible it's Sylvia. It has a Machiavellian touch."

"But I'm not to-night's Machiavelli," said Sylvia. a little tersely.

"Would you own it if you were?" asked Dr. Reid.

"Not if I had planned to own it later as a surprise for everybody. I see what you mean. If it's one of us, he's keeping it back very cleverly."

"Then it must be you," said Peter. "You have a knack for that."

Sylvia laughed and shook her head. "It's not my party," she assured him calmly. "My cook hasn't this success with oysters Rockefeller."

No one had ever pierced the icy iridescent bubble of Sylvia's personality. "You are the one woman I know," said Peter Daly, "who I feel sure has no hysterical midnights in her past."

"That's a hollow tribute," she said dryly.

Jean looked at Sylvia with a certain envy. Sylvia's unbroken poise bewildered her sometimes. She wondered if anything in the world could shake it. Her talent never manifested itself in wild brilliances, but was a steady, glowing efficiency that untangled her problems in the light of an astonishing erudition, an acid intellect that bit deep into the assurance of her opponents. "You are one of the few human beings," pursued Peter, "who has no inferiority complex. Dr. Adler would adore you."

Sylvia smiled her famous chilly smile and did not answer. The waitress had brought in the fish; she was serving the courses from Margaret, as if she had realized that Mrs. Chisholm was the supreme hostess even here.

"I envy Sylvia," said Jean to Hank. "One is certain that she never got excited about a possible grail around the corner."

"Is that your secret sorrow?" asked Hank. "Always chasing grails?"

She smiled. "Do I have to remind you that no one can storm her way to electric lights and keep her illusions intact?"

"Anybody looking at you would be likely to forget it."

Jean titled her arched black eyebrows ever so slightly. "That is one of the things I am paid for."

"Don't talk like that," said Sylvia. "It sounds cruel—like catching this pompano with a hook instead of with a gold basket."

They all laughed. For several minutes the conversation fluttered about like a candle flame in a breeze. "At any rate," said Peter suddenly, "our host has given us an adventure to talk about when we're old."

"It's beginning to look like an adventure," said Osgood. "This anonymous dinner, the rain pounding outside and Hawkins creeping about inside—we'll probably bless our host for an exciting reminiscence, as you say, when we're old."

"When I'm old," said Margaret, "I shall sit in a corner with peppermints in my pocket and give them to all the children on the block."

"Picture Margaret with a pocketful of peppermints," chuckled Peter. "Don't talk about getting old. I don't want to get old."

"Age is heartbreaking to contemplate," agreed Tim. "I dread growing old."

Peter almost shuddered. "Who wants to grow old—sitting huddled in an armchair clutching at the withered dry cord that he feels slowly being drawn away from him——"

"Exactly," said Hank, "until at last Death, the great housewife, sweeps one's puzzled moldiness into the dustbin."

"Oh, be still, Hank!" exclaimed Sylvia. "You sound like a dyspeptic deacon."

"Thunder and lightning offstage," said Tim teasingly, "mystery and candlelight in the background—when shall we eight meet again? When we're old? None of us will be very pretty when we're old. Think, Jean—even you will look like one of Macbeth's witches if you live long enough."

"Hush!" said Jean.

"That's the horror of being old," said Peter thoughtfully. "Wobbly knees and watery eyes—shaking into a grave unloved and unwanted."

"But clinging frantically to the rotten thread of life, all the same," said Hank. "Curious, isn't it?"

"I suppose," said Dr. Reid, "it is because there is none of us, in spite of our loud protestations of

faith, who does not dread and half expect annihilation."

"And that," said Sylvia, "is such a shock to our self-esteem that we won't let ourselves contemplate it. None of us likes to think that the world will jog along quite as efficiently without him."

"But it will, you know," said Tim with a grin. "Even without you, Sylvia."

"Perhaps, if we were clever, we should elect to die young," murmured Jean. "That would spare us from growing old."

"Not necessarily young," said Tim, "but when one is—how would you say it?"

"At the height of experience?" suggested Sylvia.

"Yes. Before one has had time to dwindle off in the dreadful fashion Peter predicts."

"A man should die," said Peter, "at his pinnacle, like Lincoln and Rudolph Valentino, so he would not know the pain of being entombed alive in an age whose confusion is not his own. Every one of us here, I should say, is ripe to die."

"Hush!" cried Margaret. "You're gruesome."

"But he is right," said Hank. "Any one of us, dying to-night, would leave a gracious memory.

Who can tell what sort of memory he might leave if he waited?"

"But you are terrible!" exclaimed Jean. "All of you. I don't want to die. Why should we die now?"

There was a flash of golden lightning and a rumble of thunder that ended in a crash. She shuddered.

Dr. Reid looked up. "To be spared the agony of feeling frustration creep upon us."

"He is right," said Peter thoughtfully. "Any one of us could die gracefully to-night. We are complete." He shrugged.

"For heaven's sake," demanded Osgood suddenly, "who suggested death as the motif of this dinner?"

Margaret looked up with a slow smile. "Probably," she said, "it's this situation in which we've found ourselves. We're gathered here at a party without a host, and naturally each of us wonders why he should have been invited, and searches himself out, trying to find a reason, and then tries to search out the others one by one. Naturally one is self-conscious under such conditions. I've been searching all evening."

"So have I," confessed Jean. "Looking around the table trying to ferret out which one of you is giving this crazy party, and why I should have been invited, and whether I should stay, and what's the reason for it all."

"Why do you think one of us is giving it?" asked Hank. "I've had the same feeling—half excited and half creepy—but it's been with the idea that somebody outside is giving the party, and I keep expecting him to come in. Every time one of the servants opens the door I start."

"I feel like a prisoner waiting for the jury," said Tim laughing.

"But why? It's a party," began Jean, and then added frankly. "I know what you mean. It's this air of half mystery over everything—those queer telegrams, an apartment none of us has ever entered before, the unfamiliar servants of an unknown employer—" she hesitated as Hawkins entered. He had superintended the serving of the quail and was wiping off the first bottle of champagne preparatory to offering it to Jason Osgood for judging of its temperature.

"Rœderer," said Osgood with appreciation. "And black top at that. Your master is a judge of wines, Hawkins."

"Yes, sir," said Hawkins agreeably. They waited till he was gone, then Sylvia spoke, her eyes on the tingling glass she held.

"It's an odd business all around—this bizarre setting for our dinner and that sense of expecting somebody Hank spoke of."

"There's one curious element none of you has mentioned," said Tim Slamon in his rough-edged voice, "and yet it's the most obviously strange characteristic of this gathering." The friendly magnetism of the best-liked public speaker in town drew their attention as to a firm and sturdy focus.

"What do you mean, Tim?" asked Jason Osgood, looking as though he knew the answer to his question and dreaded hearing it.

"I mean the incomprehensible sense of hospitality that would invite the eight of us here to a simple social gathering. This isn't polite, I suppose, but every now and then I feel constrained to break out of my painfully acquired gentility and point out a few facts. I can't conceive why anybody whose single aim was to give a jolly party would throw us together and tell us to be joyful. We've all been very pleasant and chatty so far, but haven't you felt, as I have, some undercurrent of hostility—every one of us covertly backing away

from one of the others, fearing a particular purpose in his presence? It's hard to analyze, but isn't this the most ill-assorted group you've ever gotten into?"

He looked around the table. They were leaning forward, listening intently like people who hear things that they have known but never acknowledged. Peter struck a match; the scraping sound was loud against the soft background of the music.

"In this room," went on Tim, "there are eight people. I dare say we are eight charming people, but for us to make a pretense of social compatibility——"

He paused; again the music filled the silence.

"Every one of us knows," said Tim distinctly, "that there's somebody at this table whom he most particularly wouldn't be found dead with."

There was an instant's quiver of the cigarette in Margaret Chisholm's long white fingers.

"Then why," finished Tim, "do you suppose we were invited here together?"

They looked at him uneasily. The air seemed suddenly heavy, as though filled with smoke. Margaret glanced at her hardly touched Camembert, tasted her champagne and put down the glass.

"Somebody's distorted conception of a bright idea," said Hank as though with a forced lightness.

"Shall we listen to the music in the other room?" suggested Margaret.

They followed her; but they were restless, and there was an air of uneasy anticipation in the room. Peter rested an elbow on the radio cabinet and smoked meditatively; Hank wandered about, examining bits of bric-a-brac; Jean sat on the edge of the sofa near the radio, listening abstractedly to the music. Dr. Reid appeared, as usual, undisturbed; leaning back calmly in his chair, he looked very much as he did when seated at his desk, serene in his own opinions. Margaret, following the dictates of her social conscience, was talking quietly to Jason Osgood. Margaret was invaluable at a party; she had a genius for avoiding those stagnant silences that are the terror of hostesses, but even she could not completely ignore the prevailing sense of tension. The music swelled into a splendid crescendo and stopped. The break seemed to startle them all. Jean stood up suddenly, a frightened look in her eyes; in her mauve draperies she looked like a wraith lost from an enchanted garden.

"I don't like this party," she said. "I'm going home."

"Jean, my dear!" exclaimed Margaret. "I'm so sorry."

Sylvia crossed and took Jean's hands, laughing at her. "Don't be silly," she said. "I wouldn't miss it for anything. If you go away, we'll never, never tell you who the host is when we find out. So there."

"But there's something—unreal about it all," faltered Jean.

"That's why I'm amused," argued Tim. "I wouldn't leave."

"I'm intrigued," said Hank. "I'd be afraid of missing all the fun if I left. Hawkins said we'd hear from our host later in the evening."

"Suppose we ring for Hawkins," suggested Dr. Reid, "and ask him how much longer we are to be kept in the dark. I wouldn't go if I were you, Jean. It will be interesting to see it through."

"Let's ring for Hawkins," urged Peter.

"Look," said Jean, "he's taken the dining table away."

They glanced through the open doorway to the dining room. The table had been moved out, and in its place was a low stand, on which an electric

coffee dripper poured a cloud of steam toward a flask and a black glass bowl. The bowl rested in a silver shell, which in turn stood in a pool of alcohol. The spices were ready for the simmering, and a heavy silver ladle lay at one side, by a silvered taper in a black glass candlestick.

"Café brulé!" cried Hank. "Help me, somebody—this host of ours hasn't forgotten a thing. We'll ask about him when this is done."

"Splendid!" exclaimed Sylvia. "Will you do the honors, Hank?"

"I'm just going to," he called back from the dining room. With Tim's aid he was bringing the stand into the front room. "Here we are." He poured the rum into the bowl. It was a vast bowl of transparent black glass, with a thin thread of silver around the rim. Tim lit the silvered taper and stood back.

"This is delightful," murmured Margaret.

"Ready!" called Hank. "Lights out. Is that a switch by the door?"

Peter pushed the switch. As the room plunged into darkness Hank touched the taper to the alcohol. A circle of blue flame flashed in the blackness. It rose in a ring of tossing points, veiling the bowl; then the flame bent over to lick the sur-

face of the rum. A thin blue sheet of fire ran across the liquid; there was a ripple on the sheet as Hank poured in the coffee. The rum flared; for an instant the ring of their faces quivered green in the glare.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said a voice from the dark.

They started back.

It was a strange flat voice, separating the syllables with slow distinctness.

"This is Station WITS broadcasting. I trust you have enjoyed the first part of the evening's entertainment. You are listening, ladies and gentlemen, to the voice of your host."

CHAPTER FOUR

THEY jerked back from the ring of flame as if it had exploded upon them; Jean gave a stifled cry, and the glass candlestick rattled as Hank set it down. For an instant they stood transfixed, then Sylvia's bright voice cut like a blade through the dark. "Turn on the lights!"

"It came from the radio!" exclaimed Hank as Peter pushed the switch.

"From the radio!" echoed Osgood. "But how——"

The café brulé in the blaze of the incandescents looked very strange. The soft hiss of the alcohol flame was lost in the excited cacophony of voices.

"Clever!" said Margaret. "He's a genius."

"This," said Osgood, "is my idea of a bright young man."

"Man?" said Hank as he served the café brulé. "I thought it sounded like a woman's voice. Jean?"

"Thanks," she said. "It might be a woman's

voice. It doesn't sound like any voice I ever heard."

"It startled me so much," said Sylvia, tasting her coffee approvingly, "that I can't say I listened carefully. He'll probably speak again in a minute, so we can find out more about him—or her, if it is a her."

"I wonder where he is," said Dr. Reid. "Could he have leased one of the local stations after the regular program?"

"He's probably got a little station of his own rigged up somewhere, with this tuned in," suggested Tim. They all laughed. The radiant fellowship of Tim lent a sparkle to his simplest statements.

"But nobody has touched the dials since Hawkins tuned in on WSMB," said Margaret. "It must be the same wave length."

"I'll call Hawkins and ask him," offered Peter, giving a jerk to the cord. As it left his hands there was a crackle from the radio.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said the voice of the host, slow, distinct and flat. The eight of them fairly sprang to attention.

"I have an idea!" exclaimed Peter. "It's one of us—ventriloquism."

"Wait—listen," said Sylvia.

"You were promised," the voice was saying, "that you would be entertained to-night at the most original party ever given in New Orleans. I shall now make good that promise, beginning by outlining the nature of our evening's amusement."

The voice paused. "Isn't this fun?" said Sylvia.

"To-night, my guests," went on the voice, "we are to play an amusing game, a game in which your eight intellects will find delightful stimulus. You, my guests, to my mind represent the cream of the city's wit. You are successful, you are sophisticated, you are highly cultured. To-night, my friends, you will find these mental capacities of yours challenged as they have never been before. You are at the beginning of the most invigorating evening of your lives."

"This is gorgeous!" cried Jean.

"At least," said Hank, "I find somebody who really appreciates me."

"Sh-h!" said Osgood.

"Ladies and gentlemen, you must be tired of gatherings at which you hear only the soft bubbling of elegant effervescence. The ideal entertainment would be at once a diversion and a crea-

tive challenge. It is absurd that one should have to assume the mental attitude of a grocery clerk before he can be entertained. One has a right to look with critical curiosity at the entertainment offered him. So to-night, my friends, I invite you to play a game with me, to pit your combined abilities against mine for suitable stakes. I warn you, however, it has long been my conviction that I should be able to outplay the most powerful intellects in our city, and to-night I shall work hard to prove myself—and you. For to-night, ladies and gentlemen, you are commanded to play an absorbing game—a game with death."

They started; a little gasp broke from Margaret, and Peter sprang up with a smothered exclamation.

"Did I understand him?" asked Dr. Reid hoarsely. "Did he say—*death?*"

"A hell of a joke," murmured Tim, looking at Jean, who seemed shaken.

"Station WITS broadcasting," continued the voice calmly. "The game, my friends, is not one of slaughter but of skill. You have been chosen with care, for only men and women of your exceptional intellectual agility would be worthy opponents. Until dawn, it is not money, power nor

prestige, but wits; yours against mine. If I should win, it is my privilege to inform you that you will all be dead—before morning."

Margaret gave a little cry; Jean's hand went to her throat as if she felt herself choking; the others looked dumbly at one another as though unable to grasp the words. Then Osgood shrugged and poured out a glass of cognac.

"Quite terrifying, isn't he? I wonder if he thinks we are scared?"

"It looks as if we are," said Sylvia with a grim smile.

"It's rather gruesome entertainment," said Tim uneasily.

"Station WITS broadcasting," said the voice again. They turned to listen. Sylvia lit a cigarette with elaborate carefulness and blew a little column of smoke into the air. "Some of you—" the words seemed to march from the radio, so well were they spaced—"seem to laugh at my suggestion. I warn you to be serious. Give attention to the rules and try to win. It is possible that your levity may lead you to disaster. It is only sporting to warn you that a violation of any rule will result in instant defeat for the violator. Defeat, of course, means oblivion."

They stiffened with apprehension. Suddenly Hank got to his feet.

"Let's walk out on this clown. I don't like his act."

"Yes," agreed Margaret. "Let's go."

"Let's go," echoed Jean, rising hastily.

"Where is Hawkins?" asked Osgood suddenly. "He didn't answer Peter's ring."

"My friends," cut in the voice. It rooted them with fearful fascination. "It pains me that you should want to run away before our first inning."

"He hears us!" cried Jean.

"Where can he be?" asked Margaret. "He must be here—somewhere."

"Behind the cabinet—no," said Hank. "In it—no, he can't be."

They came as of one accord toward the radio. But it stood against a bare space of wall, and it was obviously too small to have concealed an adult within it. The wires ran through two small nickeled pipes in the baseboard.

"Let me warn you," went on the voice, "retreat constitutes—a violation of the rules. I explain: the only way of exit, the door by which you entered, and the doors in the patio wall, are charged with electricity sufficient to kill ten men.

A touch does it. Do not touch those doors until I give you leave, if you win."

"My God!" said Tim.

"I can't believe this is anything but a practical joke."

"Joke or no joke," Margaret objected, "the man can see us. At least he can hear us."

"Simple enough," argued Hank. "A mike brings his voice to us, a mike may be carrying our voices to him. Let's cut the wire and let him talk to himself before we go baba——"

There was another crackle of static.

"I beg you, my friends," said the voice of the host, "not to touch any wires connected with this radio."

"What can you do with a mug like that?" complained Hank. "I'll bet it's the same kind of old maid that thinks of everything."

Tim Slamon had sunk weakly into the nearest chair.

"Curious entertainment," he said.

"The hookup," continued the voice, "is a dangerous one. Any break in the circuit acts as a detonator for four gas bombs in the cabinet. One is sufficient to wipe out a company of infantry. Any attempt to interfere with the working of the radio

constitutes"—again there was an ominous pause —"a violation of the rules. Ladies and gentlemen, this party has been especially planned, with a great deal of care, for our amusement. I shall not allow any of you to interfere with the enjoyment of the rest of us. You have been elected; you must stay, and play my game with me."

"Bores always cry for company," commented Hank. "Lay on, Macduff."

"But this is awful!" admonished Margaret.

"You must stay," the voice repeated, "and play my game with me. But it will be, I promise you, an enthralling game. I promise you one of those rare evenings in the course of which neither the host nor one of his guests shall be bored. None of you has led a circumscribed or uncritical life, and none of you is incapable of accepting the great challenge of his existence. For you will agree with me, I am sure, that the great challenge of life is death."

Again there was a pause, a teasing, threatening pause. A rumble of thunder rolled over the roof and the rain pattered on the windows. They all leaned forward as the voice spoke again.

"I suggested that the great challenge of life is death. But that is not true. I was merely sug-

gesting an aphorism that has been repeated so often in non-analytical conversation that it has acquired the proportions of a fact. But with a moment's consideration, my friends, you will agree with me that death is neither a challenge nor a tragedy. Death is a rich curtain rung down on a sloppy play."

"It's horrible!" said Peter.

Sylvia nodded. "As though he were justifying a murder already done," she said.

"Death," said the voice, "has too long been a portentous affair, solemn, sedate and distinctly annoying. With your kind permission I shall introduce to you to-night death in a new guise, amusing, nonchalant and clever; death, in fact, presented as a social divertissement—" The voice of the host was disrupted by a strange staccato laugh that clicked through the atmosphere: "Choice diversion, carefully planned to amuse the eight most exacting guests in macabre New Orleans. To-night you shall learn to laugh with death, the bogey man of the ages."

Dr. Reid put a match to his cigarette. The flame quivered and he flung down the match as if the gesture were a relief.

"Life, you will agree," the voice resumed, "is a

sort of tragic absurdity, and for that reason it is a foolish custom to make the end of life an event of ceremony and dread. Death should be flippant, the last snap of the fingers at a bungling stage manager. Death ought to be the playful unicorn forever teasing the edges of life. And so, my guests, to-night you and I shall play a game in which we give death the sport it deserves."

"A bull fighting with biscuits?" said Hank in an undertone. "The man sounds like a confirmed practical joker whose family orphaned him by succumbing to heart failure."

"It'll probably all end with a tableau of The Grim Reaper," suggested Peter. "Hawkins will star and an insurance company will be duly advertised."

"I wonder if that door is really charged with electricity," said Tim with a grimace, "or is that the second lesson in the psychology book that 'Congratulations . . .' came out of."

"Only the blue sky limits publicity," grinned Peter.

"But you don't actually believe him about the door, do you?" queried Sylvia.

"Hm—I don't know," Peter answered. "Suppose you go try to open it."

She laughed deprecatingly. "No. I suppose I'm nervous too."

"That damned idiot is getting on all our nerves," said Osgood. "He'll probably show up in a minute to laugh at us."

"His last laugh," promised Peter.

"You don't think this is a serious threat, do you?" asked Sylvia gratefully.

"Of course not. A ghastly brand of foolishness."

"I never did like radios," said Jean.

"You wouldn't," said Tim. "They keep people home from the movies."

Jean smiled a twisted sort of smile. "Stop being funny, Tim. You're my rock of ages and this makes me feel creepy—he sounds like a corpse talking——"

"Is there a doctor in the house?" called Peter.

"Ladies and gentlemen," broke in the flat, suave voice, "for those of you who refuse to accept my proposal as anything but a jest, and will not play the game in earnest, permit me to direct your attention to a ninth guest, who will tell you unanswerably the purpose of our party."

"A ninth guest!" cried Margaret.

"Maybe that's the host," suggested Jean.

"At the north side of this room," said the voice of the host, "you have observed a door on which a futuristic silver Artemis is about to cast a spear along the polished black of her background. The key to this door will be found between the leaves of the volume of Jean Cocteau on the corner table. Beyond the door you will find my ninth guest."

"Open it, somebody!" cried Jean. "Open it—quick!"

"I'm half scared to," said Hank. "Heaven knows what we're likely to find—maybe a two-gun bandit."

"Here's the key," said Sylvia, who had opened the volume on the table. "Shall I go into that room?"

"Not alone," said Peter quickly. "I'll go with you."

Sylvia fitted the key into the lock.

Abruptly Hank, suddenly grown serious, stepped forward and held up an interrupting hand. "Just a minute," he said. "This may be a joke. Or it may not be. Peter suggested a moment ago that ventriloquism might be the explanation. If that is true, and if one of us is at the bottom of it—we've not business letting him get off to himself. I believe we should stay together."

"Hank! You aren't serious—" Peter was demanding.

"Yes I am. I'm not accusing anybody, Peter. But you must see that I'm right."

"Certainly he's right," agreed Sylvia. "I don't think it's possible that any of us could be doing this. But impossible things happen sometimes. We ought to stay together."

"There's another reason," said Jean in a voice she tried to keep calm. "This host person must be somewhere near—for he can see us and hear us—and if one of us is left alone—and if he really means to kill us all—that would give him a wonderful chance."

"Then that's a pact," said Osgood. "We stay together. Now do we go and see if there"—he hesitated in spite of his effort to keep to a matter-of-fact voice—"if there is anything in that room?"

"May I interrupt the game a moment?" said the voice of the host.

They stopped and waited, tense.

"You are at liberty, of course, to examine every part of this apartment," said the voice. "There are no tricks. This, as I said, is to be a game of skill. However, there will be times when I shall

wish to interrupt you to explain the next move in the game. There are amplifiers here and there, and when I wish to speak to you you will hear from the nearest amplifier three strokes of a gong —thus."

They listened. The strokes came—one, two, three, high and sharp and clear.

"That is all, my friends. You may now satisfy yourselves about my ninth guest."

There was silence.

"Lord!" breathed Tim Slamon.

"Shall we unlock this door, and make sure?" asked Sylvia.

"Yes," urged Margaret uneasily. "Let's hurry. I want to make sure."

Sylvia turned the key. A sudden flare of lightning burst between the curtains and vanished with a thunderclap. They started. For a moment the rain beat at the windows, then the noise lessened and ceased. Sylvia's hand was on the knob. The door swung open, and she sprang back with a face of unutterable horror. The body of a dead man fell into the room.

Jean shrieked.

"In heaven's name—" exclaimed Dr. Reid. "Is —he——"

Peter, who had dropped to his knees by the body, looked up grimly.

"Yes," he answered in a creaking voice, "he is dead."

For a moment they stood huddled together, clinging to one another as if for protection against this strange horror that had swooped upon them. The body was that of a young man, impeccably attired in evening dress. The door opened into a closet so narrow as to be hardly more than a slit in the wall.

"The closet—is just the size of a coffin," said Jean hoarsely.

"Did any of you ever see him before?" Sylvia asked in a steady voice.

They shook their heads. The dead face stared whitely up at them.

"Let's put it back," said Peter, speaking harshly between his teeth. "Let's lock it out of sight."

"Yes, do," muttered Osgood.

Sylvia hesitated. "We ought to leave it as we found it."

"We can't leave it here," said Dr. Reid with asperity. "We'd go mad."

"We can't leave it," said Hank crisply. "We can't leave it."

"How long has he been dead?" she asked.

"I don't know," said Peter. "He seems cold."

"Ugh-h-h!" shuddered Margaret.

As if impelled by a sudden desire for air Tim flung open the door leading to the patio. The rain had stopped. A breath of damp, chilly air blew upon them. Tim stood in the doorway looking out. The palms dripped heavily, and water trickled between the stones of the pavement.

"What shall we do?" breathed Margaret.

"I don't care," said Dr. Reid vaguely, "as long as we get that thing out of sight."

"Put it on the patio," said Hank curtly.

"You mean—just throw it out there?" Jean asked in a fearful whisper.

"Why not?" put in Peter. "We can't stand around looking at it."

"And if you stood it up again and wedged it back into that closet," Margaret added shivering, "I—I'd hear its fingers tapping—I'd know it was there—in the room—I'd go mad."

As if impelled by a sudden burst of courage Hank lifted the dead thing that had been staring at them. Peter opened the door leading to the patio and they saw Hank dump the corpse on the wet tiles with a gasp of awful relief. "God,"

breathed Hank as he turned. "It's horrible. Let's get back inside. And shut the door. At least there are no corpses in here—not yet."

"You're cheerful," commented Sylvia dryly. She gave a longing look at the outside door leading to the stairs. "I wish I dared try to open that," she said.

"Don't try," said Tim. "I'm beginning to think we'll be lucky ever to open it."

"So am I," she returned.

"Cheerful yourself," observed Hank. Sylvia smiled wryly as they shut the door of the room where the radio was. They stood shivering. "Hawkins!" Hank exclaimed suddenly.

"What?" asked Peter.

"Hawkins," cried Jean. "Hawkins—you know —that stone-faced butler—he didn't come when we rang——"

They stared. Dinner seemed ages ago.

"Why didn't we realize it before!" exclaimed Osgood. "Of course. He gets us up here, serves dinner, and then slips out—he hasn't been seen since we left the table. As for his waitresses, they may have been in it too, or he may have sent them home."

"I forgot him till this minute," said Jean.

"Pling!" came a sharp bell-like sound.

"The gong!" said Dr. Reid.

"Pling!" went the gong. "Pling!"

"I can't stand it," whispered Margaret. "I can't stand it!"

Jean mechanically passed a hand over her glistening black hair. "Choke me if I scream," she whispered to Sylvia.

"Station WITS broadcasting," came the voice, slow, smooth, mocking. "You have suggested the interference of Hawkins. It gives me great pleasure, ladies and gentlemen, to inform you that Hawkins and the waitresses will not interfere with our game to-night."

"Dead too!" muttered Tim.

For a moment they stood still in irresolute fear. Death seemed to be piling in on them. Outside the wind whipped around the enclosure; inside there seemed nothing but blank, helpless horror. The thought of death, which at dinner had been only the target for whimsical contemplation, had suddenly become a ruthless force sent sweeping among them by a hollow voice from nowhere.

"If you will open the door leading from the dining room to the kitchen, you will find Hawkins

and his assistants," continued the voice of the host in toneless calm.

The voice paused. They looked at one another.

"I wish he'd change his tone sometimes," murmured Jean. "That tinny monotone is going to drive me crazy, I think."

"Has anybody the courage to look for Hawkins?" asked Margaret. "I haven't."

"I'll look," offered Sylvia. "I suppose it's as safe in the kitchen as anywhere else." She crossed the room and went through the wide doorway to the other side of the dining room. At the door she turned. With her pale golden hair and white sheath of a gown she looked like a Viking warrior-woman; her quiet courage nerved them all. "Shall I look?" she called over her shoulder.

"Yes—wait, I'll come too," said Tim hastily, and followed her. Jean came halfway across the dining room, followed by Peter; the others paused by the doorway. With a firm hand Sylvia turned the knob and flung the door wide. She and Tim together gave an exclamation of horror.

"What is it?" demanded Peter, hurrying toward them.

"It's Hawkins," said Sylvia breathlessly.

She opened the door a second time and entered with Peter and Tim. The others advanced fearfully and stood looking.

Hawkins and the waitresses were there. Hawkins was slumped over the table, face down; the others were crumpled in their chairs.

They had been seated around the long kitchen table, evidently at dinner; half-emptied plates were before them, and three empty wine bottles. Their terror-stricken discoverers had a glimpse of the familiar kitchen furnishings—shining utensils, piled dishes, the kitchen clock with its swinging pendulum that clicked into the silence. Peter leaned and reached his hand under Hawkins' body gingerly, feeling for his heart.

"Pling!" came from the radio behind them.

"I don't think I'm going to be here to get killed," said Tim hoarsely. "That thing——"

"Pling!" sang the radio inexorably. "Pling!"

"They are not dead," said the voice of the host. "My friends, I do not contest with servants. I select my competitors, as you may have observed, with care. The servants were brought here only to attend to your convenience during the early part of the evening. When their usefulness was over, I quietly disposed of them that they might not inter-

fere with our enjoyment of the evening's frolic. A harmless narcotic is all I used. They will be quite well to-morrow. In fact, if the eight best intellects in New Orleans prove no match for mine in the game we are about to play, the servants will be the first to report to the police that your corpses can be found on the twenty-second floor of the Bienville Building."

Jean swayed a little; Margaret made a curious gasping noise in her throat; Jason Osgood wiped beads of sweat off his forehead.

"Shut that door!" said the husky voice of Tim Slamon.

"Yes, do," begged Dr. Reid. Even his imperturbability was beginning to show the strain.

Hank crossed the dining room and closed the door. It banged, and the sound echoed through the still room.

"Let's look this place over," suggested Osgood. "That sneering fiend must be here somewhere."

"But he can't be," argued Peter. "There doesn't seem to be anywhere for him to hide, unless there are double walls or something storybookish."

"That's impossible," said Hank. "Let's be sensible about this business. This apartment was ad-

vertised for rent through a perfectly responsible firm of agents, the same firm that handled the offices underneath. It was described as being a charming penthouse, surrounded by a patio and all that sort of thing, but just an ordinary place after all. You don't imagine the architects would design one of those sliding-panel, double-wall, swinging-bookcase places here, do you?"

"It doesn't sound possible," Peter admitted, "but neither does any of this."

Jean nodded. "I'm beginning to believe that anything is possible up here."

"My guests, may I interrupt you a moment?" said the voice of the host.

They jerked to attention. "Kindly reassure yourselves by examining the apartment, if you wish to do so," said the voice silkily. "As I have already said, this is not a game of slaughter. It will be a game of skill, as much so as the games of chess of which our friend Dr. Reid is so fond, or the bridge of Mrs. Gaylord Chisholm, or the anagrams that amuse Peter Daly; as much so as the limericks at which Miss Jean Trent is so clever at Hollywood parties——"

"How well he knows us!" shivered Jean.

"—a game of skill, like the poker that Mr.

Timothy Slamon plays in odd moments, like the games of higher mathematics in which Henry L. Abbott likes to pit himself against numbers, or like the play of wits by which Miss Sylvia Inglesby conquers an opponent who has more legitimate evidence than she has——"

They glanced involuntarily at Sylvia, but except for a satiric flick at the corner of her mouth she listened unmoved.

"It pains me that you can still believe that I would debase our carefully planned entertainment by resorting to traps. There are no swinging bookcases or double walls. I do not intend to spoil our escapade by trickery."

The voice ceased. So gentle, so satiny, so ironically amused was it that one could almost see the speaker bowing gracefully from the waist and smiling as he sat down. They stood a moment tensely looking at the radio dials, diabolically mocking in their familiar harmlessness.

"I have said that I do not stoop to the use of silly artifices. But I warn you, my friends, that it is impossible to leave the scene of our pleasantry. Anyone who attempts to leave this penthouse will end his life in a most inartistic manner. And the deaths I have planned for you to-night or

the defeat you may devise for me, my friends, are artistic. I advise you that they are well worth waiting for.

"Perhaps it occurs to you that you might make a crude effort to leave by scaling the wall of the patio and giving a signal to someone in the street below you. I urge you to make no such juvenile display of bravado. Not only is it true that the roof of the nineteenth story extends fifty feet beyond the drop of the roof there, and that the roof of the fourteenth story fifty feet farther; but the walls of the patio, as you have perhaps observed, are curtained with vines, and at the top, laced among the vines, is a network of high-tension wires which may in the darkness have escaped your casual inspection. The heavy carriage doors that lead from the patio to the roof are all well wired. The metal roof acts as a ground, and the person who completes the circuit dies by his own hand. You are my guests to-night, and my guests you shall remain. Surely I am not to be censured for enjoying so brilliant a company; but you came because of my invitation and the beckoning of your own conceit, and you shall leave only when I bid you good night."

"We're trapped," said Dr. Reid with an air of

finality. "Trapped by a maniac—and he is watching us, shaking with silent laughter."

"Yes," said Margaret faintly, "while we sit, feeling death creep on us—" her voice broke like a stretched thread.

Jean went to the window and looked at the glow of the city lights against the sky.

"Think—" she said, "think—down there—half a million people—going quietly—about—their normal—lives—" her voice rose to a scream.

There was a grasp of a cool firm hand on her arm and a quiet voice spoke to her.

"Jean." It was Sylvia. "Jean, don't, don't lose your grip. My dear, this is horrible—but don't you see we can't go crazy? The first one who becomes hysterical throws us all into a panic. Certainly you don't want to endanger all the rest."

"But there must be a way out!" exclaimed Jason Osgood angrily. "We aren't fools. This fellow can't be omnipotent—there must be a way out, and we've got to find it."

Osgood seemed struggling hard to maintain his self-control. His face was drawn and ashen. The familiar cold metallic ring was gone from his voice, and his words tumbled from dry lips. It was as if a statue was crumbling at the edges.

Hank sat with his elbows on his knees and his temples resting in his hands. "Of course, there must be a way out," he said as if thinking aloud. "If we can't get out, there are ways of attracting the attention of people in the street so they'll know something is happening up here and come up to investigate. We ought to be able to devise something——"

"I am pained to observe," said the cool monotone of the host, "that my diversion is not entirely welcome. But since this is the case, surely the adroit intellects of my guests are devising other and subtler means by which they may avoid it. Perhaps one of you is contemplating that most desperate means, fire. It may be that you would be willing to ruin this beautifully designed penthouse and risk incalculable damage to the building on which it stands by attempting to bring attention that might be the means of spoiling our game. But you cannot believe that a building such as this would have been pronounced complete without the installation of an adequate sprinkler system. And you cannot be so foolish as to believe that I should have gathered you here for such an entertainment as ours without having taken cognizance of the sprinkler over your heads. Fire in this apartment

will undoubtedly release the mechanism of the sprinkler, but the sprinkler is provided to-night not with water for the extinguishing of fire, but with lethal gas for the extinguishing of the flame of life. Any fire sufficient to release the mechanism will cause the release of this gas, which will assuredly blot out your most intriguing lives before any aid could come from the street.

"Or you may have thought to attract attention by flooding the apartment and permitting the water to drip through the ceiling of the rooms below. You will at once recognize the inadequacy of this method when I remind you not only that the rooms below are likely to be empty at this hour but that there is virtually no water at your command. The supply at the kitchen and bathroom taps has been cut off. Two coolers in the kitchen are filled, providing two gallons of water, which I believe to be sufficient for drinking purposes, but not for rousing the notice of anyone who may be underneath.

"Some of you may think of battering down the gates with a piece of furniture that will not conduct electricity. This is impossible, because the walls of the patio and the gates are sufficiently strong to be able to withstand any battering-ram

which you can devise by any means at your disposal.

"I implore you, therefore, not to delay the progress of our game by seeking to avoid it by the foolish and quite unsatisfactory subterfuges at your command. You will find that you are compelled to yield this first point of the game to me. You are my guests to-night, and my guests you shall remain.

"But permit me to assure you that you will not find yourselves the guests of a careless host. If I have taken all precautions to prevent your avoiding my hospitality, I have also made all preparations to assure you of a pleasant evening. I believe you will find your surroundings in keeping with your own exalted conception of good taste. There is a very fine pair of foils crossed on the wall above this radio cabinet which should repay careful scrutiny. The piece of jade on the table where Miss Inglesby's favorite cigarettes were placed will be found most interesting. The binding of the volume of Oscar Wilde lying on the corner cabinet should delight any bibliophile. I am confident, my friends, that you will agree that I have taken every step to make your hours together agreeable."

The voice was cool, ironic and unchanging. Its mocking monotone paused for an instant, then went on.

"I trust that you will find the arrangements here to your liking. The boxes here and there in this room contain, as you have perhaps observed, the brands of cigarettes and cigars for which the various members of our party have shown preference. The cabinet in the dining room is stocked with whisky, gin, wines and liqueurs, and in the cabinet in the kitchen you will find a cocktail shaker and glasses, as well as oranges, lemons, sugar and other details.

"I hope that you will be pleased with the arrangements I have made. I have endeavored to suit the individual tastes of my guests to the best of my ability and that of my cellar. As it is well known that Miss Sylvia Inglesby, one of the most charming ladies of my acquaintance, rarely takes more than two or three puffs from a cigarette before throwing it away, I have provided an extra supply of her favorite brand, Turkish Emperors, which she will find in the little bronze box on the table near the dining room door."

Mechanically Sylvia rose and went to the little table by the dining room door.

"Are they there?" asked Jean breathlessly.

"Yes—dozens—and the Turkish Emperors in the little box I've been taking them from are nearly out."

"As Mr. Tim Slamon, another of my distinguished guests," continued the host, "does not like drinks mixed with ginger ale, several bottles of spring water will be found among the ginger ale bottles in the ice box. The ice box, as you may have noted, is installed in the kitchen. Mr. Peter Daly finds no alcoholic preparation so stimulating to his mind as café brulé——"

"This is terrifying!" broke from Peter.

"—he will find a can of coffee on the shelf above the kitchen table, and the dripper he has already discovered. As for the famous Dr. Murray Chambers Reid, who in his years of academic seclusion has done his work so well for prohibition, I beg of you to pretend not to notice his delight when I tell him that everything is in readiness for the making of an absinthe frappé. Will you not, Dr. Reid, make a frappé for yourself and the rest of guests, as only you know how?"

The voice paused provocatively. Dr. Reid had retained stony composure save for his tight lips and the faint flush that had crept upon his face.

Suddenly the silence was shattered by the sound of Sylvia's thin, ringing laugh. "I—I'm sorry," she apologized. "I couldn't help it. He's so lovely."

Tim's polite mask broke and he joined her laughter; then Hank and the others; Jason Osgood chuckled and clapped his friend's shoulder.

"I could almost like this host," said Tim to Jean.

"You might as well make us a frappé, you know," said Osgood.

"Please!" said Sylvia.

Dr. Reid selected another cigarette and shook his head. He managed a pale sort of smile.

"Not now," he said.

"The ice box, Dr. Reid," said the voice of the host, "is in the kitchen."

"As for my friend Henry Abbott, our own Hank, I should advise that he not attempt the concoction of gin and black coffee that had such disastrous effects on his equilibrium one evening about three weeks ago——"

"Gin and black coffee?" repeated Peter. "What's that?"

"Knock-out drops à la Hank," said Hank woefully. "It's awful. But how do you suppose he knows? I made it up at a party last month—it

was late and nearly everything was drunk up."

"—And in offering hospitality to Mrs. Gaylord Chisholm, pray remember that she never likes a cherry at the bottom of the glass."

"He must have studied us for months," said Margaret dryly.

"He's a bartender running berserk," offered Peter.

"—As Mr. Jason Osgood has acquired the habit of dividing his time into an iron schedule, and never doing anything without first looking at the clock, he will observe a very fine little Swiss timepiece before him, which will strike the hours in a pleasing tone. Mr. Osgood may be interested in knowing that he will die as he has lived, by the clock, which will strike to mark the time of his passing."

Osgood galvanized into horrid, wordless terror. The others started, snatched back to the realization that this satiric voice was holding death in the air before them.

"Don't let him scare you like that," urged Hank. "He can't kill you—we're all here, and if there's only one of him we ought to be able to hold him."

"I hope so," muttered Osgood, sinking back. Again he mopped drops of sweat off his forehead.

"At any rate, my friends," the voice went on, "I believe the essentials of a pleasant evening have been provided. There are cards in the third drawer of the cabinet in the corner, and chessmen in the fourth. Before you plan a game, however, permit me to go further into my plans for the evening, for I have promised you unique amusement, while cards and chess are painfully trite. So, I may add, is the study of engravings, foils and fine bindings. Attend then, the whims of my guest of honor. You will meet him, and perhaps like him."

"Guest of honor?" repeated Tim. "Another maniac?"

"His name," said the voice, "is Death."

"My God!" exclaimed Peter.

The voice went on.

"He is, my friends, neither savage nor heartless. True, you have been brought here to die. But you are but eight excrescences of civilization—why should you not die? All of you will die. If I had not invited you here you would live a few years longer, it is true, but at the end you would die simple, common deaths—deaths that might be experienced by any sweeper or charwoman. You would die perhaps in bed, of painful but not extraordinary disease; or you would meet death in

the form of a carelessly driven automobile on a commonplace street; at best you would die in an airplane crash, similar to those in which so many ordinary people have died. But you, my eight friends, are worthy of more gracious death. You are worthy of unique modes of exit from the world that has applauded you. You are worthy of laughing, exquisite death. This is the death I shall give you. One by one, you shall die to-night the deaths you merit."

"The deaths we merit," repeated Hank. "Why should he assume, the damned corpse hunter, that we merit any kind of death at all? I want to stay alive."

"So do I," said Jean in a vague, far-away voice. "It's queer. I've never thought about being dead before. Myself—Jean Trent—dead—I've suddenly realized that I'm not a person—just a lot of bones with flesh sticking to them—" She drooped slowly, pitifully, like a withering flower.

"Jean, my dear!" exclaimed Hank, going to her. "Sit down again. We aren't going to die. You don't think we can't get out of this somehow!"

She sank back on the sofa. "I'm all right," she assured him in a stronger voice. "I won't faint or anything. It's just that I get quivery."

"So do we all," said Hank reassuringly. "It's rather shocking to be told you're going to be dead before morning. But we'll outguess him."

"Certainly," agreed Dr. Reid calmly. "I have no doubt of it."

"My friends," said the voice of the host, "this is a game in which you are to take one side and I the other, with death, the honored guest, as the referee. I have flattered myself that I can win every round, so that as you lose, one by one, you must pay the forfeit. But if I lose—if one of you proves that he is cleverer than I, and outwits me, I promise you that the forfeit will be paid by me. If one of you outplays me at our game, I shall die in front of you all."

"Good Lord!" broke from Peter.

"I shall die," repeated the host, "in front of you all. Shall we proceed?"

Margaret stood up, her hand clenched nervously. "And he means—he really means"—she said in a high, hard voice—"to murder us all!"

"This will be a queer story to tell—a queer story," muttered Dr. Reid.

"For whoever tells it," said Tim bluntly.

"Lord!" said Peter again. "And we're up here —imprisoned——"

"Imprisoned," went on Hank, "as if we had been buried alive and had waked up in the tomb."

"Hank!" shouted Osgood, springing from his chair. "Do you want to drive us all insane?" His voice was thick and his face had a dingy color. He was interrupted by the cool, cutting voice of the host.

"But if I win, my friends, if I win, you shall pay the shot, one by one. If I win, by morning our game will be over, for when the sun rises my guests will have departed."

"Shut that thing off!" begged Margaret.

"He warned us not to," Osgood reminded her. "I'm not touching anything in this hellish house." He got a cigarette and lit it with unsteady effort.

"The rules of our game," continued the host, "have been explained. You must stay and play fairly. You must obey my instructions. Failure to do so will be—most unfortunate.

"I am no murderer, my friends. Each of you will provide me with the opportunity for his own death."

"But it is insane," said Sylvia—"awful, incredible insanity."

"Of course it's insane," said Peter, "but here it is."

"My guests," continued the voice of the host, "I know you well. In spite of your charm, your poise, your confidence in yourselves, there is not one of you that has not his Achilles heel, hidden from the world for years, but tender under the armor—and it is through this that I shall conquer you all. There is none of us, my friends, who does not hide a secret. I have learned yours. I shall attack you, not through your vaunted strength, but through you hidden weakness. I warn you of this now that you may each keep special guard over the secret you have fondly fancied has been so long concealed. Think, my friends—for it should prove interesting. Only through severe analysis of yourselves will you have a chance of outplaying me in our game."

"Think!" echoed Hank. He went to a window and looked out a minute, then turned to add, "that's just what I can't do now."

"Hush!" warned Margaret. "He's talking." She leaned forward, her hands fluttering nervously, her eyes wide, as if she was trying to drag the secret of the radio from its mocking seclusion.

"Of course," said the voice of the host, "it may be that there are those among you whom I have misjudged."

"This sounds hopeful," said Peter incredulously.

"It may be," went on the voice, "that there are those among you who, instead of one hidden weakness, have many. It may be that some one of our company lacks the strength with which I in my imagination have endowed him. I do not wish to tarnish our sport by permitting such a guest to interfere with the game we are playing to-night. A man or woman who has not the courage and the reckless love of adventure to play our game merrily, carefully and well, is not worthy to be an opponent of mine. Therefore, if there is one among you who does not want to play with me, I shall not require it."

"Thank heavens," said Tim.

"Maybe it is fun after all," said Margaret desperately.

"I don't know," said Jean. "There's that dead man in the patio."

"For such a person," said the voice gently, "I have provided a simple way of escape. If you will look on the third shelf of the wall cabinet in the pantry, among the bottles of sauces and condiments you will see a crusted silver flask. It contains prussic acid."

"Nice of him," breathed Peter.

"If there is one of you who lacks the courage to play our game, the way out is simple. It is the way of the plain, the ordinary, the beaten suicide."

"Lord!" shuddered Hank.

"When it comes to advertised bottles of prussic acid," said Sylvia, almost cheerfully, "I'm not scared. I know enough not to disturb them."

"For the present," said the voice of the host, "I have finished. You may trust me. Eat anything or drink anything in the house, without fear. The only poison is that I have just mentioned. There are to be, I repeat, no tricks. However, it is now after ten o'clock."

They looked involuntarily at the clock on the wall. The black hands on its silver face pointed to twenty-two minutes after ten. The two hours that had passed since Sylvia had looked at the blood-red of her glass and shuddered were like two eternities. The very room seemed to close in upon them, eight sane men and women against the wall of insanity, a ghostly voice whipping at their backs—"Before eleven, one of you, only one of you, my friends, will be dead."

"My God!" Jason Osgood slumped. His face was a sick gray.

"And the first of you to die," said the voice of the host, "will be the one who least deserves to live."

The voice ceased. They sat in the midst of a bleak, menacing silence.

Then Dr. Reid arose and walked over to get a cigarette.

"The horror of this thing," he said, "is to be trapped here, seeing it happen. Can anyone think of a way out?" His match flared.

"If you ask me," said Tim Slamon, "I won't be thinking of anything much longer."

"Tim, please!" begged Sylvia. "We've got to have nerve, if nothing else. There must be some way out of this."

Hank looked at the white satin figure of Sylvia, at the unruffled waves of her pale gold hair and at the steady white hands in her lap. "Sylvia," he said reverently, "you are wonderful. If I had the self-control you have I shouldn't ask for anything else on earth."

She smiled. "Thank you, Hank."

Peter rose and stood a minute by the radio, looking thoughtfully at the dials. He turned abruptly.

"The question to be answered," he said, "is, which one of us least deserves to live?"

CHAPTER FIVE

JASON OSGOOD stood in the middle of the room. The black and silver background that two hours before had typified modern speed and verve and life seemed now to create the illusions of coffins and crucifixes. "Wait!" exclaimed Osgood. He looked around the room.

" '—who least deserves to live,' " he quoted, and for a moment his eyes rested on each of the frightened group in turn as if he were trying to select the victim. Then suddenly, reverting to his best board-room manner, he rubbed his hands briskly. "We'll go mad if we chatter about this thing." They seemed to take heart from his decisive presence. "We are going to be dead by morning if we don't outwit this madman. That seems to be the glaring truth. Now if we are to get out of here we must meet this situation as logically as it has been planned to meet us."

"Of course," said Hank wearily, "you are right. But I don't feel logical."

"Certainly you don't." Osgood rubbed his

hands again. "None of us is at his best. But I trust that I may say without boasting that I have handled critical situations before and have been successful. Perhaps I can be of assistance to all of us now."

"I hope you can," sighed Hank. "I'm willing to do anything you say."

Sylvia drew a long breath. "I believe we all are. Jason probably knows more about handling a wild situation than any of us. At least he seems to be keeping his head."

"Very well. Now the first thing, obviously, is to see where we stand."

"On the brink of the grave, I gather," said Peter, in what was meant to be an aside.

"This is no time to be facetious," Osgood sternly reprimanded him.

"Lord no," added Hank. "I'm jumpy."

"We find ourselves trapped here," Osgood continued, "and informed by a bodyless voice that one of us is going to be killed within an hour and the others later to-night. If we are to come out of here alive we've got to outwit a most diabolical intelligence."

"Quite true," murmured Dr. Reid, lifting his head. After a moment he bent his eyes again

to the rug, and once more appeared to be lost in thought.

"After what has been told us," Osgood went on, "I suppose there is none of us who would dare attempt to leave this apartment. Of course, the maniac may have been lying to us; it may be that we could open the outside door and go out as easily as Hawkins opened it to let us in. But none of us is going to risk it. I wouldn't, and I wouldn't ask anybody else to do it.

"Very well. The question that arises first is, Are we alone here? I am satisfied that those poor creatures in the kitchen may be left out of the consideration. It is just possible that they drugged themselves to avoid suspicion, but even so they are only accomplices. The man who intends to take our lives is very alert at this moment.

"If we are not alone—if the person who calls himself our host is here—we ought to be able to find him. If he is really speaking from a distant station this apartment is full of horrible death traps, designed to catch us as the night goes on. I suggest that we give this place as thorough an examination as we can."

"As we dare, you mean," Peter corrected.

"Exactly," said Hank with a crooked smile. "It

may be poor sportsmanship and all that, but I'll have to confess my examination will be very gingerly."

"Of course, of course," Osgood assented hastily. "But I believe we should go into every room, note carefully if there seems to be anywhere that a man or woman could be concealed, and note also if there is anything that seems—well, out of the ordinary."

They were listening feverishly. The little clock on the wall was like a small sharp knife, nicknicking their seconds of safety.

"We have wasted ten minutes," said Osgood impatiently. "Hadn't we better begin?"

"To be sure," said Hank, getting to his feet. "Will you divide us up, or shall we go where we please?"

"I'll divide you." Osgood looked thoughtfully at them. They were sitting stiffly on the edges of their chairs, regarding one another with ill-concealed distrust. Already there was appearing among them the primitive urge of self-protection, giving rise to a subtle sense of hostility. "Listen to me!" he said sharply. "We must be honest with one another. That ghostlike voice is all we have to fight so far. He had probably reckoned on

getting us divided among ourselves and thus easier prey for him. One of us who refuses to co-operate, whether because of suspicion or because he is too much interested in his own safety to care about that of the rest of us, is endangering his own life as well as the lives of us all."

He noticed that his words were making an impression. His hearers were regarding him attentively. Osgood was calmer now than he had been for an hour. He was Jason Osgood, man of action, the leader who was listened to in every bank in town.

"Tim Slamon pointed out at the dinner table that some of us do not like some of the others. We must forget that. We've got to stand together. Here—" he walked to a door at his left and opened it, showing a bedroom. "Sylvia, will you and Jean examine this bedroom, and the bathroom there?"

"If this bathroom is like others, it will be full of cabinets and things," put in Hank, "and I think somebody ought to have the bathroom as a special job. Why not Margaret? There's no sense in sending the women out to scrutinize that thing on the patio, you know."

"All right," agreed Margaret. "I'll take the

bathroom. Thanks, Hank. I'm willing to do anything for the general benefit, but I'm more comfortable indoors where everybody is alive."

"The general benefit," repeated Hank with a grin. "That's the slogan. Even Dr. Reid has got to turn communist."

Dr. Reid glared suddenly. It looked like another hiatus. Osgood, obviously battling against time, made an impatient gesture.

"Come, come. Now for the entrance."

"I'll take it," said Hank. "Who'll come with me?"

"Me," offered Peter.

"You two take the entrance walk, this side of the palms," said Osgood. "Now there should be several to inspect the patio. It's dark there, and we want to make as thorough an examination as possible in the short time we have. Dr. Reid and Tim, will you take the patio? I'll take the kitchen. Go over everything as carefully as you can without running any risks. Try to get a mental picture of what you see, as accurately as possible. You have only ten minutes. I'll call for your reports then. Ready?"

"But," objected Sylvia, "you haven't given this room to anybody."

"I'll take it myself," said Osgood, "this room and the kitchen."

She nodded, and they divided according to his instructions. "Let me go into these crazy-angled cabinets," Sylvia said as she crossed the threshold of the bedroom. "Why don't you look for electric traps near the floor, Jean—there may be many more of them beside those in the outside doors."

"All right," Jean acquiesced. "I won't get off the edge of the rug."

Osgood went into the dining alcove. He opened a cabinet and found a bottle of whisky and poured himself a drink. Then, striving for a casual step, he went back into the front room and made a show of looking about. Through the open door he saw Hank and Peter examining the tiles at the end of the entrance walk. Going to the bedroom door he made as if to examine the lock.

"Mind if I close this a minute?" he asked. "I want to see how the latch works."

"Go ahead," called Sylvia. "The voice has no clothes, Jean. Nothing in these cabinets but knick-knacks."

Osgood closed the door with studied deliberation. As it latched he fairly sprang toward the

radio. His precious moments of aloneness were few.

"Can you hear me?" he hissed in a sibilant whisper toward the dials. "It is Jason Osgood. I am alone in this room. Can you hear me? Quick —answer—can you hear me?"

He dropped on his knees to give the impression of examining the cabinet in case he should be interrupted by one of the others.

"Listen to me! I am Jason Osgood. You say you are going to kill me to-night. But you are not. Do you understand? Kill anybody you like, but you can't kill me. I'll make you glad not to kill me. Give me a sign you are there—answer me somehow, if you hear me! Just a word—whisper! I can hear you."

For a tense, awful instant he listened, straining his ears for a bit of sound. But the radio was silent.

"You do not understand—I am not threatening —I am offering to make a compact. Kill anybody you like—I swear not to betray you—but let me live! Can you hear me? Will you make a deal?"

Again he listened. The radio was silent. Osgood shuddered; the veins were like cords in his forehead.

"Listen to me, you fool—I don't want to die—I *can't* die now—will you take a half million dollars for my life? You can answer safely. There is no one in the room but me. Half a million dollars—put for you anywhere you say. Why should you want to kill me? Did I ever hurt you? If I did, tell me. Tell me, and I will right it a thousand times over. Speak to me—speak, in God's name! You can kill the rest of them—I won't spoil your party—I'll go knock myself out in the kitchen if you'll tell me where you keep the stuff, and I won't see anything—answer me!"

Silence.

"A million, then—two million—three! Three million dollars, in good negotiable securities—or cash as soon as I can get it—three million dollars—and I'll never try to find out who you are—I swear it!

"Three million—if you will let me live! If you know as much about me as you seem, you know I can get into my bank at any hour of the night. You can hold a gun over me till I give you three million dollars' worth of securities. If you don't like that plan, take me home; I can have my box brought there—I'll pay you off, give you three million dollars—I'll do anything, but spare my

life—I'll help you to-night; do anything, if you will only tell me that I will be alive when the rest are dead. Speak—can you hear me?"

His hands clenched over the edge of the rug; his whole body was trembling.

"If you don't want money—if you are afraid I won't play fair with you—I'll show you now that there is a pool to rocket cotton prices on the twenty-fifth—you can be rich—will you take it?"

No answer. The voices outside came again, warning him that he might be interrupted; his own voice dropped lower.

"Let me be your partner to-night; I will see that every one of them accepts your challenge and is eliminated—I will kill for you if you like—wound me if you want to—make it look as though you have failed—that will allay suspicion—and after to-night I will make you rich—I swear it! Speak, quick, before they come back! Speak!

"You can't hear me, can you? You aren't there! Nobody is so eager to kill that three million dollars won't tempt him—three million cold dollars, man—listen! Three million——"

His whole body quivered. He edged closer to the radio.

"I'll let you kill all the rest. *Answer me!* Hurry!"

The radio was silent. From outside Osgood could hear the faint murmur of voices.

"You don't hear me!—you aren't there!"

Silence.

A sudden understanding seemed to come to him. His jaw hardened.

He scrambled to his feet. With terrified caution he made his way across the dining alcove into the kitchen. Trembling with terror he saw Hawkins and the waitresses slumped in their horrid stupor. With a shaking hand he opened the cabinet on the wall and looked at the bottles of sauces. Drops of cold sweat broke out on his body. His eyes started open. There it was, as the voice had said, standing off to one side—a crusted flask, its silver design worked into a wreath of twisted vines.

He took it off the shelf. His hands shook. The flask had a screw top, decorated with three black grapes of natural size worked in ebony. With a desperate effort he gave it a twist. It did not yield. Another twist. The top gave. He took it off. It clattered from his hand to the table. He jumped at the sound.

Lifting the bottle, he smelt it cautiously.

The eight cocktail glasses that had been used at dinner stood on a tray at the end of the table. There was liquor as the host had said. With unsteady hand that spilt the liquids, Osgood managed to pour eight drinks. To seven of them he added prussic acid. He replaced the flask on the shelf and closed the door of the cabinet, carefully wiping flask and door to remove fingerprints.

Fighting for calmness, he carried the tray into the front room. As he set it down he heard the voices outside, and he smiled grimly. No matter which of them was at the bottom of this, he would find himself outwitted. The deaths of six innocent people were a small price to pay for the death of the one of them who was planning to kill Jason Osgood.

The black hands on the silver clock had nicked their way to ten minutes of eleven. Osgood went to the bedroom door and opened it. Jean was still on her knees examining the floor; Sylvia stood before a cabinet with two drawers open.

"Nothing suspicious here," said Sylvia when she saw him. "Want us to come report?"

"I think we'd better get together," Osgood said. Margaret came from the bathroom.

"Plenty of fancy soap and iodine and mercurochrome and adhesive plaster," she said, "but I don't find anything that looks lethal."

Osgood went to the door and called to the others in the patio.

"As you see," he began when they were together again, "it is nearly eleven o'clock. If our host keeps his word he will try to stage some sort of coup at eleven, and it seems best we should get together."

"Do you want our reports on the layout?" Tim asked. "We made a ghastly find."

"Yes," said Osgood, "we should know the arrangements of the place as soon as possible. Let's begin——"

"Did you mix some drinks?" asked Hank, eying the tray. "Good of you."

"Oh, yes—I was about to forget them. While I was poking into things in the kitchen I came across the liquor the host told us was there and I thought we'd probably need it."

"Bright idea," said Hank. "If ever I needed a drink, it's now."

"So do we all," agreed Sylvia.

Osgood carefully took his own glass from the tray and held it up with a smile he hoped was jovial. Hank took another glass and gave one to Jean. The others took their glasses gratefully.

"Well—" said Hank, "—here's hoping we all have pretty tombstones." He raised his glass.

"Don't drink!" came a sharp command from the radio.

"Wha—what?" said Peter.

They had all stopped, their glasses high. Suddenly, as if by a common impulse, they looked at Jason Osgood. He was standing quite still, staring vacantly into space. His face had taken a nauseous green cast. An exclamation of horror faded on Jean's lips as the voice of the host spoke again.

"It pleases me greatly to tell you, my friends, that Mr. Jason Osgood of the Amalgamated Banks will be dead within three minutes."

Jean sprang up with a scream; the others stared strickenly at Osgood, then suddenly Dr. Reid went toward him. "Jason!" he exclaimed—"Jason!"

With a stern hand Sylvia motioned Dr. Reid back.

"Don't touch him," she almost whispered.

Osgood, with his blank face and fixed eyes, appeared not to notice. The glass dropped from his hand; the contents spread a dark spot on the rug. They looked at him in speechless horror. It was as if they were watching him crumble before their eyes.

His jaw sagged; his eyes bulged horribly; then his whole body seemed to shake together, and Jason Osgood slumped across a chair.

"He's—dead!" whispered Tim hoarsely.

"Dead," Dr. Reid echoed stupidly.

"The first of us," said Peter.

"I knew it!" Tim almost shouted. "I knew it —when we saw those coffins—I knew it was intended that we should use them——"

"Coffins?" Margaret repeated. "Tim—what coffins?" She grasped his arm frenziedly. "What coffins, Tim?"

"On the patio," he answered, sinking back into his chair. "Eight coffins."

"Heaven's mercy," whispered Sylvia.

"My friends," said the voice of the host.

"You mad squeaking devil!" cried Tim, rushing at it. Hank caught his arms fiercely.

"Don't touch that thing, Tim!"

The voice went calmly on. They turned almost

with relief from the bloated, distorted thing on the chair. Margaret covered her face with her hands. "I think I am going to die before he can kill me," she said.

"My friends," the voice was saying, "I believe that I have won the first round of our game."

In a mocking tinkle, the little clock in the corner chimed eleven times.

CHAPTER SIX

THEY stood an instant as if frozen before the incredible awfulness in the room. Then Dr. Reid passed his hand across his eyes as though to push away a mist.

"He was one of my best friends," he said in a low voice. "There aren't many men like him in the world."

"It doesn't seem possible," said Margaret wearily. "I can't realize it. Jason Osgood—he was the *alivest* man I ever knew."

"Do—do we have to *look* at him?" Jean almost screamed. "Put that chair somewhere—please——"

With a swift movement Hank turned the chair around, so that its back came between her and the thing slumped there. Peter reached unsteadily for a cigarette. "Can't we—put it somewhere?" he asked.

"We ought to leave it untouched—" Sylvia began, but Hank sprang up with an exclamation.

"Leave—that? Sylvia, do you want us all to

collapse? You can keep your legality for people who aren't going mad—we are going to put that thing somewhere out of sight!"

"In a coffin!" said Tim dazedly. "Those coffins —you know—one for each of us—I saw them—when we are all murdered like this——"

The chime sang three times from the radio. They turned with a sort of eager relief.

"Realizing that the presence of a corpse is likely to prevent full enjoyment of our evening, and wishing to make your last hours as entertaining as possible, I have provided a place for the vanquished, a place under the palms and the sky, a place where the echoes of our game cannot be heard. On the patio, half concealed by a cluster of palms, you will find eight beautifully appointed coffins."

"Coffins?" repeated Hank stupidly.

"They are fitted in black and silver," said the voice of the host.

"Oh—my God," breathed Dr. Reid. "I saw them—eight coffins."

"Somebody murdered Jason," said Margaret suddenly. "Somebody—murdered—Jason. But who?"

"I think I know," exclaimed Dr. Reid. "Jason

Osgood was a friend of mine, a very dear friend, and I do not intend to let his murderer go unpunished." His voice was even, and his eyes went swiftly around the circle. Suddenly he fairly leaped from his chair and leveled his forefinger at Tim Slamon.

"You!" he cried in a voice vibrating with rage and fear. "You hated him—you have tried for years to get him out of your way—and now you have succeeded."

"Dr. Reid!" cried Hank, as Tim with an angry movement of his big body turned his back disgustedly on the dean.

"You know you are lying," said Sylvia calmly.

"You know I am not," retorted Dr. Reid furiously. "You know——"

"You can't deny you hated him, Tim," said Margaret. "We know that."

Tim turned, and his clenched fists relaxed as he felt the warning grasp of Sylvia's hand. "Yes, I hated him," he said. "But I didn't kill him. You may accuse me of it if you like, of course; but it's easy to see I couldn't have done it. I wasn't touching him."

"Of course Tim couldn't have killed him," said

Peter. "Tim was with you in the patio during all the time Osgood was alone here."

"I believe, Dr. Reid," said Sylvia, "the shock of your friend's death has made you quite unreasonable, and I am sure Tim will overlook what you have said."

Dr. Reid stood quite still and did not answer. His eyes were fixed on Tim, who was lighting another cigar with great deliberation. Then Tim spoke.

"Apologize or not, Dr. Reid," he said, "I'm not going to follow my inclination and knock you down. I know nothing about how Jason Osgood met his death. I haven't been near him since I spoke to him a few minutes before dinner."

"Mr. Slamon," said Dr. Reid with a sort of fierce calmness, "I make no apology and I believe what I said. You are right in saying I cannot prove you killed Jason Osgood. But I know, and the rest of us here know, that you and Jason Osgood have hated each other for years, professionally and personally; we know that your rivalry had become more and more bitter as time passed; and we know that his death gives you and your circle control of the political life of New Orleans,

so that you and Miss Sylvia Inglesby and your friends will have undisputed collection of the City Hall graft. I wish to repeat in the presence of these witnesses that I believe you are responsible, in a way I do not understand, for the death of Jason Osgood, because you are the only person to whom the death of Osgood means the elimination of the last obstacle in his path."

"Be careful, Dr. Reid!" exclaimed Peter in a warning voice.

"Why don't you kill him, Tim?" demanded Hank.

"Because," said Tim slowly, "I have learned by long and severe experience when to keep my temper. Dr. Reid is behaving like a fool. I should only like to tell him that his haste to fasten the death of Osgood on the first likely person raises a question in my mind: he may be trying to turn suspicion away from himself, and if he does know about this business I'd thank him to unlock the front door."

"Are we all quite crazy?" exclaimed Peter, and then there was a torrent of angry, fearful words, rising to a crescendo of confusion; and suddenly the voice of the host cut through the room, calm and toneless as before.

"My friends——"

With one impulse they started back from the radio as if it had made a threat.

"My friends, I beg you to be calm. None of you is guilty of the death of this man. I told you a short time ago that each one of you to-night would be responsible for his own death. Jason Osgood, and he alone, caused the death of Jason Osgood."

"But this is madness!" Sylvia cried.

"My friends, I told you that the first of your company to die would be the one who least deserved to live. I have kept my promise.

"The drinks that were offered you were, I regret to say, not offered as a pledge of loyalty. They were intended to kill you."

There was a pause and a crackle. The room seemed filled with a sticky silence.

"The guest who offered them to you was unworthy of your company. It was explained to you a few moments ago that if one of you did not desire to play our game to-night, he would find a means of escape at hand in the form of poison. The bottle of prussic acid was ready to speed his cowardice. But it was intended, not for murder, but for suicide. The guest who offered you

drinks was so cowardly that fear overcame his reason. Thinking that one of you was in league with me, he must have reasoned that by eliminating his fellow guests from the contest he would destroy the reason for our party and make his own escape without hindrance. So by securing a few moments alone, he prepared drinks and poisoned seven of them. These drinks, I regret to say, were meant for you.

"But though he could have taken his own life without interference from me, I could not permit him to take the lives of my other guests. So I warned you in time. He took no life but his own."

"But he didn't drink anything!" Hank exclaimed, staring bewilderedly at the radio.

"He did not drink anything," said the voice calmly. "But the flask was prepared to give double assurance of suicide in the event that one of you sought that method of escape. Its grape-topped cap spurts tetraethyl lead through a cleverly constructed hypodermic. The cap fits close, and in the effort to unscrew it he pricked his hand in several places and the pressure sent the poison into his blood. It is a notoriously swift poison. That precaution was taken, my friends, with a purpose. If one of you unscrew the top

with the intention of drinking the acid, he would have had no reason for complaint, for the entrance of the other poison would but have hastened his release; but I had prepared so that anyone who opened the flask for any other reason than that of suicide should not thwart our game. I believe, my friends, that you will agree with me that our deceased fellow guest was the agent of his own death. I believe that you will also agree with me that the first one of our company to die was he who least deserved to live."

"This sort of thing," said Margaret blankly, "is beyond reason." She sank limply into a chair.

"But it does happen, evidently," said Peter with a wry smile. He lifted one of the glasses and carefully whiffed its odor. "Prussic acid, all right. Detectable even here. He must have prepared a stiff dose for all of us."

Dr. Reid sat down uneasily. "Mr. Slamon," he said sadly, "I apologize for what I said. I, too, would have drunk——"

"It's all right," said Tim.

"Please," begged Jean, "let's put him somewhere."

"Yes," said Hank, "let's get that thing out of here."

"We might as well use one of those coffins," said Tim.

"Yes," said Sylvia, "do, please. It's terrible, but——"

"I'll help move him," Peter offered, "if somebody will come with me."

"I think," Sylvia put in quietly, "that we have learned now that we should stay together."

"Right," agreed Hank.

"We've been more or less in sight of one another all along," said Peter. "I saw Osgood go to the kitchen, and come back with the drinks. But I never dreamed——"

"Of course not," said Tim. "But you didn't see him put in the acid. I'll help carry that body out, Peter, and the rest of you keep us in sight."

Jean shivered and caught Margaret's shoulder as if for protection as Peter and Tim lifted the heavy weight that had been Jason Osgood. Hank opened the door leading to the patio. They watched as the body was carried out behind the palms.

"There they are—those coffins," Tim mumbled.

They were there, half hidden by the palm fronds, eight coffins, pushed together like packing boxes. One of the palms lay on its side

where Tim had overturned it in the horror of his discovery. On the tiles near them the light fell on the face of the unknown dead man.

Margaret shuddered and covered her face with her hands. Jean leaned against the walls as if she could no longer stand alone. The fine scholarly face of Dr. Reid looked like a death mask. Sylvia stood near him, her hands caught rigidly in front of her as though to prevent their trembling.

Hank leaned over the edge of the ghastly collection and struck a match as Peter and Tim lowered the body into the place that their host had left for it. Tim straightened up and looked at the black dead face against the tiles. "Mightn't we get that out of sight too, Peter?" he suggested hoarsely.

Peter's hands clenched and unclenched.

"Yes," he said. In the silence they raised the body and lowered it into a coffin. Peter drew the lid with a shaking hand.

"Let's get inside," said Dr. Reid in an inhuman voice.

They fairly ran through the doorway and slammed the door behind them. "What shall we do now?" breathed Margaret.

"We are going to sit down," said Hank suc-

cinctly, "and try to evolve some solution for this crime."

"Also," added Peter, "we are going to try to think of some means of saving the rest of us. We are all booked for murder."

"Sit down here, Jean," said Hank gently, leading her to the sofa. He drew out chairs for Sylvia and Margaret, and took up the tray of poisoned drinks.

"I'll throw these out," he began in a grating scrape of a voice, "unless—" he hesitated. "Is there anybody who can't stand it?"

They stared at him, Hank in front of the radio, offering poison on a silver tray, as if the voice had suddenly taken form and stepped across the dials. He stood an instant looking at them. Margaret sat to one side, in a high-backed cushioned chair. She had twisted one hand tight in her rope of black pearls; above her velvet gown her face was gray as the face of a corpse. Sylvia sat near Tim, one hand on his knee, and her sea-green eyes were not on the drinks, but on Tim, as though she feared he was about to yield to their offer of escape; but Tim, though looking fixedly at Hank, did not move. Dr. Reid was looking at the floor. Peter stood near him, his hands grasping the back

of the dean's chair. On the sofa sat Jean, in the flutter of her mauve skirts, tensely quiet, but there was a glint of defiance in the look she gave the poison on the outstretched tray.

"I'll throw them out," said Hank. He walked to a window, raised it, and emptied the tray into the courtyard. The glasses clinked and broke on the stones. Hank closed the window. "There's plenty of decent liquor," he added, "if anybody wants a drink."

Dr. Reid looked up. "I wonder if we can trust it?"

"We've been drinking it," said Peter. "And that host person, whatever else he had done, hasn't fooled us. He warned us of all the dangers we've met."

"I suggest, then," said the dean, "that each of us take the precaution to pour his own drinks."

"I suppose you are right," agreed Peter with a shrug.

Hank nervously poured a glass of rum and gulped it. "If anybody else wants one," he said dryly, "there it is. It's good liquor and we all need it." He crossed the room and stood facing them.

"Listen, everybody," he said curtly. "We're

here, and told we're going to die. Of course every one of us wants to look out first for his own safety, but the dreadful lesson we have just had ought to teach us that we aren't going to be allowed to play any tricks on the fiend that got us here. I have an idea that if we all manage to keep our heads clear through this awfulness we can get to the bottom of it and save our lives. *What's that?*"

For from the radio came a sound, the note of a gong. They sat forward. It came again, and again.

"The next of your company to die," said the slow, toneless voice of the host, "will do so before the clock strikes twelve."

"Go on, Hank!" cried Peter. "Go on—if you have an idea in your head—go on! I'm trying to keep sane—but I can't seem to think. Go on, if you have the ghost of a notion of how we can get out of here."

"Maybe we can find out who is behind it," said Sylvia, "if we can think. If we can think!" she repeated desperately.

Hank passed his hand across his forehead. "We've got to wrench ourselves loose from our self-defensiveness and work together," he said.

"To begin with, we've got to be frank. This is absolutely no time for polite reticences. Much as I dislike saying it, it's possible, you know, that the host of this ghastly party is known to one of us."

"Don't say that," begged Jean. "It's horrible enough without thinking that one of us may know something about it."

"I know it's a horrible suggestion," said Hank. "I can't believe it's true myself. It probably isn't. But it is possible. In such a situation as this, if any of us are going to get out alive we have got to face all the possibilities without caring whether or not we hurt anybody's feelings."

"You're right," said Sylvia. "I had rather have my feelings hurt than be dead. So if anybody thinks I'm in league with this radio creature, say so. I'm not, but I won't mind being suspected if it helps us any."

Hank pushed back his unruly hair. "Thank you, Sylvia," he said. He looked at her, still calm in the midst of the turbulence. Her moonbean presence seemed to encourage him. "Sylvia," he went on, "you are a supremely rational person. What do you think this is?"

"A supremely rational plot to murder us all,"

she answered steadily, and her voice was thin as a stretched wire.

Peter Daly leaned forward, looking intently into Sylvia's ice-green eyes. "Sylvia," he said, "I wonder if you know anybody who would like to see you dead?"

"Why—I don't know. I don't think so. I'm a perfectly harmless person."

"Are you?" said Jean's voice from the sofa.

They started and looked at her. Jean was calm, intent.

"Of course you are not a harmless person, Sylvia. Neither am I. Neither is Peter, nor Hank, nor Tim, nor any of us. There isn't one of us, probably, who doesn't know that somebody would be greatly relieved if we were out of the way."

Hank turned to her as if relieved by the sudden change that had come over her.

"That's what I was thinking," he said. "Somebody wants us dead."

"I can't think who wants me dead, though," said Tim.

"Somebody," said Peter, "wants us all dead."

"It's a terrible thing to discuss," said Jean faintly.

"Of course it is," said Peter. "I feel as if I were sitting in on my own autopsy. But all the same, as Hank says, we've got to face this thing. There is somebody who had been deprived of what he wants by us, and who is taking his revenge."

"But I've never deprived anybody of anything," exclaimed Dr. Reid.

"Think," said Hank suddenly. He took a step forward. "Is there any one of us who does not know there is somebody who might have had more if we had not lived? Is there anyone alive who had not grasped for himself the good things of life while others looked on, helpless? Is there no one, Dr. Reid, who might like to have you out of the way?"

"Yes!" exclaimed Dr. Reid, starting to his feet. "You! And you know it. You hate me, and there you stand like a grinning half-wit——"

"Damn you!" Hank strode over and gripped the shoulders of the professor savagely. "You call me a potential murderer and a grinning half-wit because I'm straining every atom of self-control I possess not to turn loose like a screaming maniac! I'll stand a lot from anybody at a time like this, Dr. Reid, but if you've planned to sit around and watch me die, let me warn you that

you won't find me accepting any little death agony you've saved up without——"

"Hank! Dr. Reid!" came the desperately controlled voice of Peter Daly.

"I'm sorry." Hank slumped into a chair and dropped his forehead on his hands. "I seem to have exercised my peculiar talent for making an ass of myself, on an unusually inopportune occasion." He wrenched out a sort of smile. "I apologize," he said to the dean.

"So do I," said Dr. Reid unsteadily. "I'm off balance. It was my fault."

Hank poured himself another drink and shook back his head as though to clear his brain. "No, mine. I was the one to suggest that we accuse each other of being responsible for this, and I couldn't take my own medicine. I guess I'm a sort of idiot."

"Not at all," said Dr. Reid with an effort.

"Please go on, Hank," urged Sylvia. "If there really are any of the rest of us who believe any of the others might have reason for enjoying their demise, we ought to know it."

"I believe we should begin with Dr. Reid," said Hank, at ease again. "Dr. Reid, I swear to you I'll keep my temper. If you have reason to be-

lieve I would murder you, will you be good enough to tell me what it is—and tell the rest of us?"

"It was very foolish of me," said Dr. Reid uneasily. These were the first apologies he had had to make in years, and it was hard for him. "But I will attempt to be frank. A wild idea came to me that you had borne a grudge against me ever since you were asked to resign from the university faculty."

"That is quite true," said Hank quietly. "I'm ashamed to acknowledge it, but nevertheless it's true."

"Hank wrote a scenario for me once, which wasn't bought," said Jean smiling, "but I don't think he'd murder me for it."

Hank turned to her. "The prismatic personality of Jean is a delight in a time like this," he said. "No, I wouldn't murder you for not taking a scenario from me. You couldn't take it now, anyway. I gave the idea to Peter and he made a story out of it."

"We are getting lamentably off the subject," said Sylvia. "Hanks owns he had a grudge against Dr. Reid. If we keep on we may find out things about ourselves that will point to a clue."

"Quite right," said Dr. Reid. "Hank, I be-

lieve, said something about my planning this. Perhaps he will explain himself."

"I'm sure I don't know why I said it," responded Hank. "I was out of my head for a minute. Being accused suddenly of being about to kill somebody is disconcerting."

"I admit it," said Dr. Reid with an effort at pleasantness.

"Very well," said Hank. "We'll go on, then. Now the first motive for murder that people usually look for is money. Is there anybody who would be benefited financially by our deaths?"

"Not by mine," said Tim. "My will is made, and everything I've got goes to Mrs. Slamon and the girls, except for a few small complimentary bequests to my friends."

"Is any of those large enough to make any appreciable difference to the person named?" asked Hank inexorably.

Tim hesitated a fraction of a second. "I don't think so."

"Tim," said Sylvia gently, "I think you ought to tell us."

"I won't," said Tim.

"Tim," said Hank, "I don't believe there is one of us here who can't be trusted to keep a confi-

dence given to-night. If we aren't open about all these things, it may mean death for us."

Tim bit his cigar savagely.

"I have left two hundred thousand dollars to Sylvia."

The party fairly congealed. Sylvia turned wide, astonished eyes upon Tim.

"Tim—you didn't! How could you?"

"You're the best friend I ever had," said Tim stubbornly. "You know you've made more money than that for me." He uncrossed his big legs. "Now, all of you, I told you so you wouldn't think I was keeping back something suspicious. Sylvia didn't know she was mentioned in my will. And if she had found it out, you know she wouldn't kill me for it. I hope you're satisfied."

"As a matter of fact," said Hank lightly, "all of us know that Sylvia isn't in need of money. Not with the practice she has. So that's that."

Sylvia walked across the room and got a cigarette. She turned to face the party.

"I think you ought to know," she said firmly, "that I haven't got a cent."

"What!" exclaimed Peter.

"Oh, I spend a lot," said Sylvia. "I've never been able to manage money. Just now, I have

three hundred dollars in my checking account and seven dollars and some change in the little bag I brought to this party with me, and that is every bit of money I've got in the world."

"I was never so amazed in my life," said Jean slowly.

Dr. Reid had leaned over to speak to Peter.

"I don't believe a word of that tirade," he said in an undertone. "She always pleads poverty whenever she sees a chance to forestall an accusation of graft."

"It isn't reasonable that she should be poor," Peter admitted under cover of the storm of surprise evoked by Sylvia's statement, "not when you consider the money she must be making."

"Taking," Dr. Reid amended dryly.

Peter bit his lip. "I always liked Sylvia," he said, "and I've fancied that most of the gossip about her shyster practice has been inspired by political acrimony." Dr. Reid shrugged cynically, and Peter noticed the wonder in Jean's voice as she added:

"You make such a lot of money, Sylvia."

"I always owe it. I owe about ninety-two hundred dollars now to various people." Sylvia went back to her chair and sat down, wearily, her chin

on her hand. "I didn't know I was mentioned in Tim's will, but I can't prove it; and I wouldn't want to see Tim dead for two hundred million dollars, but I can't prove that either."

Tim went to her and awkwardly put a big hand on her shoulder.

"Quit acting like a criminal, Sylvia," he said. "I'm not dead yet, you know, and until I am you can't be accused of murdering me."

She looked up with a forced smile. "Of course not, Tim. We know about tight places," she added half defiantly.

"I hope we do," said Tim smiling. "No, I don't know of anybody who'd want to murder me. There are a lot of people who don't like me overmuch, of course, but I don't believe any of them would kill me."

"What about you, Sylvia?" asked Peter abruptly.

She shook her head. "No—unless it would be people I've caused to lose cases." She stopped as though she had already said more than she had intended.

"We know," said Tim, "that the man you just defeated is dead outside. We needn't speak of that."

"Certainly not," she agreed, but there was a certain constraint in her manner.

"Never mind, Miss Inglesby," said Dr. Reid icily. "Everyone here probably read the papers and therefore is quite well acquainted with the fact that it was because of you that Paul Stanby's will was set aside less than three months ago, and my department of the university deprived of a substantial bequest." He looked at Sylvia as if he saw something slimy in her green eyes.

"Why don't you go on?" she asked with cold bitterness.

"It is hardly necessary. By this time it is well known that few persons engage your talents unless they have need of a type of service that most of our leading lawyers consider it beneath them to give."

"Good heavens, Dr. Reid!" exclaimed Peter. Tim glared and was about to speak when Sylvia interposed.

"Don't fight for my virtue, any of you. I am too well accustomed to this sort of accusation from my defeated antagonists for it to make me angry. I only wondered if Dr. Reid would say it here."

Dr. Reid shifted his eyes and looked down as if regretting his outburst. "It is rather unreason-

able to suppose that a man in my position would kill you out of spite."

"Certainly," said Hank quickly. "You wouldn't get the money if you did." He smiled and changed the object of his questions. "While it doesn't seem likely that anyone should want to get rid of a rare bit of decoration like Jean, it seems only fair to get her ideas on the subject. Jean, do you believe there's anybody who might fancy that he would be benefited if you were out of the way?"

Jean looked up. Her eyes met his squarely for an instant, then her small Watteauesque figure stiffened and she surveyed the others.

"I thought you were going to ask me," she said, slowly and very distinctly, "and I have been debating with myself as to whether or not I should answer you. But if there was ever a time when one has a right to answer a question like that, it is now. There is just one person who I know would be very happy to see me dead. That is Peter Daly."

Peter did not move, but Sylvia made a pleading gesture. "Jean!" she exclaimed.

"Of course you don't want me to go on," Jean said bitterly. "I have been the means of Sylvia's

losing one of the few important cases she has lost in recent years, and she doesn't enjoy discussing it. But I know Peter Daly would like me dead better than he likes me alive."

Peter looked at her. Deliberately he walked across the room and stood facing her, his eyes narrowed with studied contempt.

"No," he said, "I wouldn't kill you. I think you are a disgusting little snob, overwhelmed with the sense of your own importance, but that's all. I wouldn't kill you."

"Must we discuss this?" put in Hank repentantly. "I feel responsible for beginning it."

"I believe," said Dr. Reid, "that both of you owe it to the rest of us to explain yourselves."

"I'm perfectly willing to explain," said Peter with acid politeness. "This has been brewing all evening, and it's something of a relief to have it out. Go ahead, Jean. Tell them your side of it."

Jean folded her hands about her fan and faced the company with a hardness strange to see effacing her usual bubbly personality.

"Perhaps you remember," she said, "that when I played in stock here five years ago Peter Daly was dramatic critic of *The Item*. I had the lead in the stock company. I was very proud to be

leading woman, for I was terribly ambitious, and I was working so hard. Everybody had thought I would make a hit here; I had grown up in New Orleans, and they were sure I'd go over in my home town.

"But Peter Daly wouldn't let me. Peter, you know, was the last word in the theater here. He was clever, and everybody in town read what he wrote. From the first week I was here Peter did his best to ruin me. I knew why he was doing it; I'll tell you that later. He never deliberately said I was rotten; that would have been easier to stand, but he was too subtle for that. You know how he writes—the chief charm of his books is his nuances of style, his way of making a sentence suggest what it doesn't say. That's what he did to me. He made nasty little remarks. He suggested this and that—disgustingly. He wrote as if he was lifting his eyebrows and being infinitely amused at my antics. He made me ridiculous.

"And he ruined me. I was so young, and I was trying so desperately hard to be a good actress. Of course I wasn't very good. I was too inexperienced. But I did want to learn. And I couldn't. Peter had made me self-conscious. Every time we opened a new play I fairly shivered

through it, for I knew he was in the audience cocking his eyebrows at me and that the next day I'd read the same bright remarks at my expense, spread out for the whole town to see. None of the other papers had a very experienced critic, and they had a habit of following Peter's lead. Nobody can imagine what that experience did to me. It nearly wrecked me for good.

"It did wreck me here. I couldn't give a good performance. Always I knew he was out there in the dark, grinning. It lost me my chance in New Orleans. They got rid of me.

"I went back to New York, to the blackest winter of my life. I had started with such great hopes, on my big chance, and I had flopped. I had to go back to the casting office a plain failure. Maybe you don't know what that means. It means walking the pavements, counting your money and wondering if you can hold out. It means sitting in casting offices, hoping they won't offer you a stock job in Peoria and then praying they will. It means eating in the automat and then not eating there because you can't spare the nickel. It means knowing you're no good.

"It didn't last forever. I got a mite of a part on Broadway and they liked me. Then I had the

ingénue lead in The Doorstep, and then I got my chance in pictures.

"But you see, I knew why Peter tried to wreck my career. He wanted to force me into selling Chetwood.

"Chetwood is our estate in the Teche country —oh, a marvelous place, a big, white-columned manor set in a grove of live oaks, and the moss hangs off the trees and there are magnolias that flower in spring, and behind the house Bayou Teche winds along, thick with water hyacinths. Colonel Daly and Major Trent bought it after the Civil War because they couldn't bear to think that Reconstruction was going to wipe out every vestige of the beautiful leisurely life they had loved, and they wanted a haven. In their wills they said Chetwood was to belong to the Dalys and the Trents forever, unless all the heirs agreed to part with it. Peter and I are the only surviving heirs.

"Now they say they've discovered oil on the property, and there's a syndicate that is howling to buy it. Think of it—to cut down the oaks and magnolias and put up a lot of drills and ruin all that beauty—I can't have it. I have enough money to live on and so has Peter, but he wants more. He thought that if he made things hopeless enough

for me I'd be driven to selling. But I wouldn't. I loathe his nasty ideas of commercialism and I won't sell the only perfect piece of beauty I own, not if I'm starving. But if I were dead Peter could sell Chetwood to those people—and they'd make an oil hole out of it—and Peter would be a millionaire."

She gripped her fan as if it were symbolic of the estate, and went on harshly:

"The fact that all the money in the world couldn't buy another Chetwood doesn't matter to him. He wants the price of Chetwood. He got Sylvia to try to make me sell, but I knew what I wanted and I got a good lawyer and my right in Chetwood is still mine, and it will be mine unless I die without heirs. If I should die to-night he would get the whole price of Chetwood instead of half. That is why Peter Daly would like to see me dead."

Peter still stood looking down at her, with the sort of half-loathing, half-fascinated regard he would have given an odd little snake curled up before him.

"Are you quite done?" he inquired.

"Yes," she answered. "I am quite done. Now I suppose you want to justify yourself, and maybe

explain why you think I'd like to kill you. Go ahead. I'd rather like to hear it."

For several seconds the room was silent. The hostility between Jean and Peter had taken almost visible proportions; it was as though it stood between them, ugly, vast and threatening, a thing that had begun between Jean and Peter but which now none of the others in the room could escape.

Then Peter, who had continued bending on Jean that look of infatuated disgust, began to speak.

"Five years ago," he said, "when you played in stock here in New Orleans, you were the same conceited little creature that you are now. But you had talent. Anybody with an infantile knowledge of the theater could have diagnosed your affliction—talent buried under a mountain of self-conscious complacency. I had no personal grudge against you, which you of course won't believe, since you seem incapable of attributing to me any motives higher than those that might in reversed circumstances have inspired you. But you revolted me. I said so. Over and over I put into printed English words what you needed to make yourself into an actress. But your colossal self-assurance wouldn't let you take criticism. You

resented it, and you exaggerated your imbecile mannerisms to prove you didn't need it. When I heard you had gotten fired I clapped myself on the back. 'If she pounds the pavements long enough,' I said, 'she may get tired admiring herself and give her intelligence a chance to see the light.' And that's what happened. Heaven put you into the hands of a good director. You were so glad to get a job that you did anything he told you. You made good. If you'll sit through one of your box-office hits and watch yourself with a critical eye you'll see that you have been made to take every hint I ever gave you. But you won't see it. You are still so conceited that you will only say to yourself, 'There's Jean Trent! Beautiful, talented Jean Trent! Look at what I'm doing! Look at the miracle of me!'

"The only proof I can offer you that I didn't try to ruin your career so as to make you sell Chetwood is that I didn't open a legal contest until after you were making enough money to engage a capable lawyer. However—" he shrugged and turned away from her. "However, after your address to the assembly to-night I can't help wondering if the full price of Chetwood might not prove more tempting to you than half

of it. Well—how can man die better than by feeling the slim, scented fingers of a beautiful woman around his throat?"

He walked away from her and sat down. Again there was silence, one of those bleak dark silences more terrible than any words. Sylvia spoke abruptly.

"If each of us persists in behaving as though the others had conspired to murder him there's very little use in discussing anything."

No one answered her. The atmosphere was thick, threatening. Dr. Reid lit a cigarette. Suddenly a thin, silvery stroke sang through the silence. Jean sprang up.

"Twelve o'clock!" she cried. There was a swift bright triumph in her voice.

"Twelve o'clock!" echoed Dr. Reid.

The clock tinkled out the hour. Jean was laughing aloud. Her metamorphosis had broken the tension.

"We seem to have fooled him!" exclaimed Peter delightedly. "He said one of us would be dead before twelve—and here we are!"

"Right!" cried Tim, stretching his arms in immense relief. "Here we are. Alive and kicking! We fooled him."

Jean clapped her hands. "We did! He hasn't killed us!"

Hank snapped his fingers at the radio. "You've lost a round of the game, Voice. Now it's your turn. Come out and die like a man."

"Now tell us how to get out," Peter cried to the radio. "Come along, everybody! We've got to get out now—we know he isn't invincible. Somehow we've bested him—I don't know how, but we did!"

He was laughing too. Their sudden triumphant consciousness had broken the tightness. They were like children who had just received a present.

"Voice!" called Sylvia. "Tell us how to get out! You've lost, you know."

"I never realized," said Tim with a long sigh, "how good it is to be alive."

"This awfulness," said Dr. Reid sadly, "was probably an elaborate plot to murder Jason Osgood."

"Come on, Margaret!" cried Jean gladly. "Get your cloak! We're going to get out!"

They were all laughing, and their words tumbled over one another in an ecstasy of relief. Hank had flung open the door leading to the patio; the cool air that blew in brought a damp fra-

grance, and from the patio they heard the swish of palms.

"Come along, Margaret!" cried Jean. Her fluffy skirts billowed around her as she ran to Margaret's chair. "I believe she's fainted," added Jean in a scared whisper. "Margaret!"

She shook Margaret's shoulder. Suddenly she recoiled with a scream. Margaret's arm had fallen from the arm of her chair and hung limply at her side.

"Margaret!" cried Sylvia. Then she stopped. They all stood as though suddenly petrified. A sense of horror crept over them. Margaret did not move.

"Margaret!" screamed Jean. "Margaret!"

"Margaret!" cried Dr. Reid hoarsely. He put his hand on her shoulder, and stepped back with a gasp. Her body fell forward and crumpled loosely on the floor.

"Heaven help us," breathed Tim. He knelt on the rug, and while the others stood transfixed he felt her pulse and her heart.

"Is she—" began Hank.

He nodded, and got unsteadily to his feet.

"She is dead," he said in a voice hardly more than a whisper.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE radio crackled. Jean shuddered, and felt Sylvia's firm arm around her.

"My friends," said the voice of the host, "you have observed the demise of Mrs. Gaylord Chisholm. You have observed also that I kept my promise that the second of our party to leave us would do so before midnight. After a few seconds' explanation you will observe as well that I have kept the promise I made when I said that each of you shall provide me with the means of his own death."

"But she couldn't," gasped Peter. "Margaret hadn't moved—or spoken."

"If you will lift the cushions in the chair occupied by Mrs. Chisholm," continued the voice, "you will find hidden just where her head rested a thin black rubber object that looks like a double foot rule, joined with three clasps. This is a receiver connected with this radio by a wire which runs through the leg of the chair and under the

floor. When the chair is resting on a particular spot the connection is made."

Tim raised the cushion at the back of the chair Margaret had occupied and nodded grimly.

"While you were engaged in your entertaining conversation," the voice went on, "I whispered into Mrs. Chisholm's ear, and what she heard was a secret so terrible that Mrs. Chisholm, weighing it, preferred to die rather than to face the world again; for I told her that in five minutes you would all hear what she was hearing. So she died."

"A secret!" exclaimed Dr. Reid. "Margaret had no secret. I have known her for twenty years —ever since her marriage. It's impossible."

"It's absurd anyway," said Hank. "People don't die like that."

"Perhaps," said the voice of the host, "you are unaware that Mrs. Chisholm's heart had been beating unsteadily for years. That was another secret that she guarded carefully. But that was not what I told her. I told her what she thought no human being knew but herself—that she was a bigamist."

"A bigamist!" echoed Sylvia. "Margaret—a bigamist?"

"Mrs. Chisholm," said the voice, "was twenty-

six years old when she married for the second time. But Mrs. Chisholm had been married before. I call her Mrs. Chisholm because that was the name by which you knew her. But she had no right to it. The only name to which she had a legal right was that of her husband, Jimmy Vickers, whom she married when she was sixteen, and whom she never divorced.

"You are amazed? So was she. The secret of Jimmy Vickers lay buried, she thought, in Kansas. For when Margaret Chisholm was little Maggie Reynolds of the bayous, she went off to Kansas and got herself a job. You didn't know that either, did you? Mrs. Gaylord Chisholm never confessed to her friends that she had ever had to work for a living.

"In Kansas she married Jimmy Vickers. But it didn't take. They lived together three months, and Jimmy Vickers left for parts unknown, and Maggie Reynolds came back home to her folks. She was ashamed of herself, for Jimmy Vickers, my friends, was not the sort of man who even then could have been expected to take the fastidious fancy of Maggie Reynolds with her high-flown ideas.

"Then came Gaylord Chisholm. You know that

story. How Gaylord Chisholm was swept off his balance by this flame-like girl, and how he brought her home, and how the papers ran great stories of the marriage of the Chisholm heir to Miss Reynolds of an old plantation family. Ah, my friends, Miss Reynolds' family was old only in the sense that we are all descended from the cave men.

"But how could Maggie Reynolds confess her mésalliance to Gaylord Chisholm? How could she brush fortune and power from her lap? She did not. For ten years she had not heard of Jimmy Vickers, and she never heard of him again until to-night.

"Would you like to hear what I whispered into the delicate ear of Mrs. Chisholm? I said: 'Maggie, you have been wondering, haven't you, who I was? I'm going to tell you, so that you and your friends at my party won't need to wonder any longer. I am Jimmy Vickers, Maggie, your husband, and I staged this party in your honor. I'm tired of living by myself out West, Maggie, and so I've come to New Orleans; and I've seen you on the street several times, and I rather like the grande dame you've become. But I don't like the deal you gave me. Pretending all these years

that I didn't exist. It wasn't nice of you, Maggie. So here I am. I'm in an office just under this penthouse, and in five minutes I'm coming in. I'm coming in to kill you, Maggie.'

"So," continued the voice of the host, "I killed Maggie Vickers with a lie, or she killed herself with pride."

The radio was silent.

"But it's horrible!" murmured Jean.

"I can't believe it," said Dr. Reid. "It's preposterous. Margaret Chisholm—it can't be true."

"Possibly not," said Sylvia quietly. "But it killed her."

She walked over to the table where Tim was unsteadily fumbling for a cigar.

"Give me a match," she said to him.

Tim glanced up. "Oh, it's you." He touched a match to her cigarette. "Sylvia," he added in a low voice, "do you remember there was something queer about Gaylord Chisholm's death in France? Could he have found this out—and killed himself?"

"It's quite possible," she said. "He would have, if he had found it out. He was like that. Poor Margaret!" She turned at an unaccustomed sound behind her, and saw Peter and Hank lifting

the limp body that had been Margaret. Sylvia shuddered as she saw Jean and Dr. Reid go mechanically to the door and watch while Margaret's body was lowered into the coffin that had been left ready for it.

When they had come back she sat for an instant thinking, then she spoke suddenly.

"We all respected Margaret Chisholm," she said. "Shall we agree that this thing we have just heard shall be kept among ourselves?"

"In heaven's name, yes," said Peter.

Hank looked at Dr. Reid, who sat chin on hand, studying the floor, as if removed from the confusion around him.

"What are you thinking, Doctor?"

Dr. Reid lifted his head.

"I am trying to clarify this horror in the light of analytical psychology," he answered. "It leads to the appalling conclusion that any one of us might logically be the perpetrator of this hideous crime."

"Any one of us?" repeated Tim. "What do you mean?"

"I was not speaking with reference to physical facts," the dean responded. "The physical methods being used here to-night are such that none

of us, I am sure, can understand how this crime can be the work of a person inside the apartment. But I am convinced that the killer is someone in this room. There are six of us left. One of the six has plotted the death of the other five. Wait!" He held up a warning hand as Tim started an angry retort.

His scholarly calmness drew their strained attention. The room was silent as Dr. Reid's eyes went around the group, resting for an instant on each of his hearers. They were watching him with ugly intensity. It was as if the strain they were enduring was cracking their outer personalities and making dreadful emotions visible through the fissures. They looked at Dr. Reid and at one another as though each of them was discovering in all the others horrible possibilities.

"Of all the men and women of my acquaintance," said Dr. Reid at length, "there are few who could kill. But every one of us in this room is a potential killer. One moment. I shall explain." He laced his long slender fingers on his knee. "At my left sits Henry L. Abbott. You, Mr. Abbott, are a man of many wayward talents, which you have never been able to concentrate toward a single purpose. You paint pictures. I believe you also

write poetry and bits of essays for the new-art magazines. You are somewhat of an expert on certain very advanced theories of economics. You have dabbled in engineering. But you are lazy-minded. Your mental energy, never having been channeled toward an object worthy of it, finds expression in theories of art and life which to a conservative like myself seem rather wild. But it is a very great mental energy, and for expression it needs only the great impetus toward one purpose which you have never had. If that impetus occurred in the form of terrific resentment, the volcanic manifestation of your at present dribbling strength could conceivably be in the form of murder."

Hank frowned thoughtfully. "You are right. It's rather disconcerting to be dissected as a potential killer."

"Of course it is. But proceeding with our analysis, let us consider Timothy Slamon."

"What?" Tim winced, and turned toward Dr. Reid such a face as he would have lifted to a dentist about to start grinding.

"Understand," went on Dr. Reid, "that we are assuming in every case the presence of motive sufficient to inspire murder. Assuming that, what

do we find would be Mr. Slamon's characteristic reaction?" He paused suggestively and went on. "Mr. Slamon is a man of power in this community, power which he has gained by a violent, and some say, unscrupulous struggle. He is notoriously a man who will pause at nothing to gain his end. His career has been from the beginning a ruthless series of fights, in which he has kept his attention rather on the end than on the means. He would not kill for revenge, but for a purpose ahead. If Mr. Slamon knew his career to be threatened by a person who could be eliminated only by death, he might choose to eliminate him in that way."

"Thank you," said Tim, and there was the faintest suggestion of a sneer in his voice.

Dr. Reid went on dispassionately.

"Miss Sylvia Inglesby is reputed to be a sort of icicle woman, without apparent emotion or uncertainty. She has won her enviable prestige in her profession by her almost supernormal ability to reason calmly in the most pandemoniac situations. You will remember that in all the nerve-racking chaos of this evening Miss Inglesby has never once appeared off her guard—something none of the rest of us can say. Such terrible self-control is frightening to us poor mortals who sometimes lose

our heads. Miss Inglesby must have normal emotions; such tight bottling-up is unnatural. If this iron self-control met unprecedented strain, what is more likely than that its break would be, not an ordinary flare of temper or nerves, but a catastrophe, a rush of pent-up reactions that would sweep Miss Inglesby into sheer madness?"

He looked at Sylvia. She met his look, frosty-eyed.

"Very ingenious, Dr. Reid," she said quietly. She smiled her familiar serene smile. "I had never thought of myself as a possible murderer, but I suppose after all that there's no use denying that I might be, for nobody here would believe it."

Dr. Reid had already shifted his gaze to Peter Daly.

"Peter Daly," he said, "is a man gifted with a very unusual degree of imagination. If you have read his books you know also that there are times when he gives evidence of deep insight into human motives. But there have been cases where such talents have been a curse. Cesare Lombardo has proved to us that the line between talent and insanity frequently does not exist. If this should prove true in Mr. Daly's case, such an orgy as

this would be comprehensible as an evidence of too great talent gone astray."

Peter paled slightly. He made no comment.

"Jean Trent," continued Dr. Reid, "has just shown us how deeply she can cherish resentment. Given what she deemed sufficient motive, Jean has fostered a peculiar hatred. A man or woman who nurses hatred for its own sake is, as any qualified psychologist will tell you, potentially capable of murder."

"I don't want to kill anybody," Jean said like a scolded child. "Besides, nobody here ever hurt me, except Peter."

"I am not considering what the motive of our host may be," explained Dr. Reid patiently. "I am considering only our several potentialities for responding to a motive, whatever its origin."

"You've left yourself out," said Tim bluntly.

"Yes," acknowledged Dr. Reid, "I have. In such a time of stress as this it is hard to dissect one's self, particularly when one knows one is not guilty of crime."

"You could be, you know," exclaimed Peter with strained abruptness. "Of course you could! How can you sit there and calmly say that any of us could have committed murder to-night—when

you may be planning to kill us all—what a perfectly beautiful way of gaining time for the next move!"

"Do you mean to insinuate—" began the dean furiously, starting from his chair.

"Of course I do! Sit down!" Peter stood facing him. "You have told us we could be murderers—so could you. You suave monster of intolerance, secure in your welter of old opinions! You are a stubborn man, Dr. Reid," he went on more calmly, "accustomed to acting without advice. Suppose you found the accomplishment of purposes very dear to you irretrievably blocked by another person or group of persons. Suppose that because of that person or group you were to be compelled to change your whole precious mode of conduct and were to be forced to act in accordance with principles not your own. You think you could not kill then? Dr. Reid, the Gibraltar of academism, faced with change—and he would not be driven to murder?"

"Of course he might be, Peter," interposed Sylvia. "But for heaven's sake, both of you, quit snarling at each other. You know that we haven't time to listen."

Peter looked at her with a penitent half smile.

The struggle for self-mastery was showing even on Sylvia.

"Thank you, my dear," he managed to say, quietly enough. "I'll be good."

"It's quite terrifying," said Hank pensively, "to think that if I were not what I am I might be a murderer."

"Oh, no, you wouldn't, Hank," said Peter. "If you were not what you are you'd be a designer of smart perfume bottles."

Hank shrugged without replying. Peter resumed his chair and looked meditatively at the end of his cigarette.

"All this analysis is very interesting," he commented, "but I believe Dr. Reid's major premise is wrong. The fellow who calls himself our host simply *can't* be one of us."

"Why not?" demanded Hank. "Dr. Reid has put his finger on the crux of this devilish scheme. Yes—our host is here—smiling at me while I talk! My God—I wish I knew which one of you to throttle!"

"You might as well start," murmured Sylvia wearily. "At least you might get the right one."

"All this rot would be funny if it wasn't so ghastly," observed Tim with a sigh, "but it doesn't

answer the important question, which is, 'How do we get out?' "

"Yes!" Hank fairly shouted, leaping to his feet. "We talk and talk—and in the meantime death is creeping on us—and here we sit! This is murder, strange, foul, horrible—and here we sit! We are informed by a bodyless voice that we are all to be dead before morning—*and—here—we—sit!* Oh—God!" he crumpled back into his seat, for a mumble of static was coming from the radio.

The gong sounded three times.

"Sit quite still, my friends," said the voice of the host.

"I won't!" cried Jean, starting up. "I want to get out—I am going to get out!"

"Jean!" Hank and Sylvia started toward her.

"Don't let yourself go mad," Hank begged, laying a quietening hand on her shoulder. Sylvia slipped an arm about Jean and sat on the sofa by her. Hank leaned over the back, watching them tensely as the voice went on:

"My friends, as it is nearly one o'clock, I shall proceed to select my next antagonist in our little game."

"Lord!" gasped Dr. Reid.

"I trust," said the voice, "that you have been

well amused during our—shall I say—time out? But the clock ticks, and our game goes on. By this time, I believe you have become acquainted with the mode of my playing. The two who have failed in their encounters with me were the weakest of you, incapable of accepting the more highly ingenious type of combat I have saved for you who are left. You who are listening to me are persons of complex personalities, capable of profiting by what you have seen. I have selected for my next opponent in the game one who is worthy of a clever attack——"

Jean gave a low moan.

"—one who may conquer me, and yet one whom I believe I shall overthrow. The form of our next challenge, ladies and gentlemen, is unique, amusing and essentially adapted to my opponent. The opponent whom I now call into the ring, to display his skill for your diversion, is our mutual friend, Mr. Tim Slamon."

"Heaven forbid," gasped Tim.

"Tim!" cried Sylvia, rushing to him. "You—are there?"

"Yes," he said thickly. "I'm here—so far."

"Calm yourselves, my friends," said the voice of the host. "Our encounter, Mr. Slamon, will be,

as I promised, a battle of wits. If you outwit me, our game is done."

"Think, Tim! Think!" pled Sylvia.

Tim appeared not to have heard her. He sat forward in his chair, his eyes glued to the radio from which came the mocking voice.

"Go on, you damned beast," he muttered.

"The lights are going out!" shrieked Jean.

The lights were going out—slowly, slowly, the globes were dimming.

They were shouting, screaming, cursing, impotently under a dull red glow. Then even the glow was dying.

"Pray be seated, my friends," said the voice politely. "I choose only one opponent at a time."

They drew back from the radio, fearfully. The room was nearly dark; red lines reflected on the edges of the furniture made a ghastly pattern in the dimness. Tim Slamon still sat on the edge of his chair, staring at the radio.

"Tim!" Sylvia screamed.

"Uh-huh," he said dully.

She moved closer to him. "I'm here, Tim."

Tim seemed hardly to notice. Stony with terror, he gazed at the dials, which were like dull red glass in the faint light.

The lights clicked off.

They started and stumbled in the blackness. "Tim!" cried Sylvia. "Tim!"

There was a gasping inarticulate noise from Tim; there was the rush of stumbling feet in the dark and cries of struggling helplessness as they fought in their blind terror. The dark was close around them like black velvet clinging to their eyes. A faint line showed between the window curtains, but inside the room it was black, thick on their eyeballs. A frantic unseen hand jerked aside a curtain, but it gave no light; the curtain fell and there was a groan of tortured horror.

"Who was that?" cried Peter's voice.

"I—here—Dr. Reid——"

"Where are you? This is Hank."

"Hank! It's Jean—where are you?"

"It can't stay black like this forever!" came the voice of Sylvia from a far corner. "Where are you, Jean?"

"Here—" Jean's voice was faint. A hand touched her arm. She screamed.

"Don't—it's only I—Dr. Reid—who's that?"

"It's Hank. Thank heaven I found somebody here——"

"The switch is no good," they heard Sylvia say.

"I felt along the wall, but it doesn't work—Tim!"

"Where is Tim?" cried Peter. "Where is everybody? I can't find you—" he stumbled against an unseen figure. "Who are you?"

"I'm Sylvia—where is Tim?"

They clung to one another in sightless frenzy.

With a sudden rush the lights came back. Half blinded, they struck into the air for a chair back, a table, anything solid to give assurance that the whole world was not swirling around them. A long shivering sound that was half a moan and half a scream cut through the pandemonium.

"Sylvia!" exclaimed Peter, recovering himself and hurrying to her.

"He is dead," she said, and dropped into the nearest chair.

The words snatched them all back with terrible clarity.

"He is dead," repeated Sylvia.

Hank walked across to Tim's chair. He had fallen against the back, his hands grasping the arms.

"I'm afraid—she is right," he said.

"And now," said the voice of the host, "I believe you will agree that I have won the third round of our game."

"Gold help us," groaned Dr. Reid.

"Dear Sylvia," murmured Jean.

Sylvia rose, pushing back a strand of hair that had fallen over her forehead, and with an unsteady hand she took a cigarette. At the left corner of her mouth was a wry lift that was neither a grimace nor a smile. Her face under her golden hair was of a strange pallor.

"I suppose," she said, "that we really will all be dead by morning."

She lit the cigarette and inhaled deeply.

"Of course—it's dreadful, but why are you all looking at me like that?"

"We are all realizing," said Hank Abbott in a low, terrible voice, "that you're a rich woman now."

The words fell with a sludgy thud into the silence. Sylvia did not answer. She simply stood there, looking at him.

"You damned fool!" burst in a shout from Peter. "You damned fool, Hank Abbott! How can you—her best friend—in heaven's name, what——"

"Stop!" shouted Hank. "I'm tired of being polite and listening to a lot of sentiment and philosophic mollycoddle. Now I'm going to say what

I think. Tim wasn't a thing but Sylvia Inglesby's best client. She's got more crimes on her shoulders than anybody else in town, and he knew it. Nobody but Tim Slamon could have told how easy it would have been for Sylvia to be disbarred a hundred times. Nobody but Tim was hand in glove with Sylvia's crookedness. What became of the money that was intended to repave Rampart Street? What happened to the Audubon Park improvement funds? I don't know and you don't—but Sylvia does—and Tim Slamon did. No wonder she mewed and smiled and said he was her best friend. She had to. How do we know what was happening to their plans for more graft? How do we know he wasn't getting restive under her bossing? How do we know what he might have been ready to tell if his mouth hadn't been shut?"

He stopped. They stood stiff with horrified astonishment as Sylvia walked over and stood facing him.

"Are you quite done, Hank? Very well. I did not kill Tim Slamon."

"Of course you didn't," exclaimed Dr. Reid. "Mr. Abbott is quite insane."

She lit another cigarette. "Will somebody

please—put him away? I can't bear to look at him."

"Yes," said Peter. "Come with me, Hank," he added crisply. "It will get you out of here. The rest of you can keep us in sight."

Sylvia turned to the window and twisted the cord of the shade till they were back.

"This leaves five," she said dully.

"My friends," said the voice of the host.

"Oh—have mercy!" cried Sylvia desperately. "Be still!"

"My friends, since Mr. Slamon's timely death has taken place, perhaps Miss Sylvia Inglesby will be able to explain to us just why in all her dealings with Mr. Slamon, she was never able to make him overcome the effects of his lowly origin?"

"What do you mean?" shrieked Sylvia. "Stop tormenting me!"

Peter took her hands in his and chafed them gently. "Can't we all go into the bedroom and shut the door, so we can't hear this thing?"

"We can hear it in there," muttered Dr. Reid, his head in his hands. "He has amplifiers."

"I mean, my friends," went on the voice calmly, "that if Miss Inglesby had taken a little while

from her so-called legal practice to outline to Mr. Slamon the elements of good taste, he might still have been among us."

Sylvia quivered and cowered; she seemed to be cringing into herself. Peter held her hands as though to support her.

"Give me another cigarette, somebody," she murmured. "Thank you," as Dr. Reid hastened to comply. "Do you—think he's nearly done?"

"Isn't there anywhere in the house that she can go to shut off that voice?" exclaimed Hank in an undertone to Jean. "I think she is going to faint."

"Nowhere—you heard Dr. Reid. There are amplifiers everywhere," Jean whispered back. "She can't stand much more. I—I've never seen her like this."

"If you will be good enough to examine the chair which Mr. Slamon was occupying at the time of his unfortunate demise," the voice continued, "you will observe that its rococo carving gives opportunity for concealing a little knob at the front of each arm, and another on each of the front legs. These, if pressed with the finger, will release four needles, each capable of injecting into the blood a sufficient quantity of tetraethyl lead to cause quick cessation of life. When the lights clicked

off a few moments ago, Mr. Slamon, already under a nervous strain caused by his having received word that his death was imminent, started and gripped the arms of his chair, and with a characteristic convulsive motion curled his legs about the front legs of his chair. Both these reactions, your memories will tell you, are characteristic of our deceased friend. If Mr. Slamon had been possessed of sufficient self-control to sit quietly when the lights went out, he might have returned to his office to-morrow morning.

"This, ladies and gentlemen, was my part in the encounter with Mr. Slamon. But the part played by Miss Sylvia Inglesby was more interesting, because more subtle. Mr. Slamon learned much under Miss Inglesby's tutelage, but one thing he did not learn—he sometimes failed to distinguish between the minute manifestations of good and bad breeding. How did I know Mr. Slamon would select the chair prepared for him? Because, ladies and gentlemen, that chair was included in the furnishings of this apartment with the purpose of attracting Mr. Slamon's approval. Mr. Slamon, you will observe, had elected to sit in the only chair in the room which is in thoroughly bad taste."

Sylvia's cigarette had dropped from her limp

hand to the rug. Peter stepped on its glowing tip; the movement seemed to snatch her attention from the radio. Her frozen self-control broke; she wrenched her hands loose from Peter's detaining grasp and covered her face.

"Sylvia! Sylvia, my dear!" exclaimed Jean gently, going toward her.

Sylvia started and looked up. "Let me alone!" she shrieked. "Let me alone! In heaven's name let me get out of here! If that thing speaks again —let me, Peter! I want to get out—I will get out!"

Madly she made a dash for the door and flung it open. Her running steps clattered on the stone courtyard.

"Don't let her touch that outside door!" shouted Peter, but she was ahead of them, striking her fists on the paneling.

"Let me out!" she screamed. "Can't somebody hear me? Let me——"

As they reached her her voice cracked; for a split second a blue-green flash tingled over her fingers and her body stiffened under the ghastly force that rushed from the door. They stopped in speechless horror; with a convulsive movement Dr. Reid put his hand over his eyes. For an instant the white figure clung there, quivering as the cur-

rent tingled through the satin of the dress, then suddenly, before there had been time for more than a shudder from the stricken group halted terrified on the flags of the courtyard, it fell and crumpled up on the stones.

Peter grasped Hank's arm and their eyes met. Hank nodded. Then he turned away, as if he could not look at Peter or at the still, white object on the tiles.

"Sylvia killed herself," he said, and his voice was muffled as though he were speaking into a cushion. "And I helped drive her to it."

There was a rattle in Jean's throat, and they turned abruptly to look at her; Dr. Reid instinctively put out an arm as though she were falling. But Jean was staring rigidly at the door.

"Dr. Reid was right," she said in a queer metallic voice, "when he said she'd go mad if anything broke her. The door was there all the time."

"But it isn't now!" exclaimed Hank, staring as if dazed by a sudden realization. "The current is off. She couldn't have fallen if he had turned it off."

The other three started; Peter had put out a hand toward the door when a dry cackle of laughter sounded in the air above them.

"Pray do not let us have another suicide, my

friends," said the cool, sardonic voice of their host. "The current in the door was released only for a moment. The door at present is quite as deadly as it was five minutes ago."

Hank groaned helplessly. Jean took a sudden step forward.

"Sylvia!" she cried. "Sylvia!" She dropped on her knees beside the white satin figure before them. The other bent over her fearfully. Hank felt for a pulse in the limp wrist.

"Gone," he said in a hollow voice.

"It can't be!" cried Jean. "Sylvia—she never lost her head before in her life."

"But she did—after holding out longer than any of us could have done," said Hank. "As you said, Dr. Reid was right. The door was here all the time, and she forgot that this door was planned for just this kind of a murder."

"I—I want to cry like a baby," said Peter.

"She was so amazing—the most completely beautiful and brilliant woman we've ever known!" cried Jean.

"Listen!" cried Jean.

They all stood and looked at one another, stony with horror. For through the open door to the front room they had heard the clock strike one.

CHAPTER EIGHT

HANK buried his face in his hands. "I can't bear it," he said. "Sylvia went mad—and I helped her."

Peter laid a hand on his shoulder. They were back in the front room, grouped again around the radio that drew them with horrid fascination even as they dreaded it. The room, empty of Sylvia's gold and ivory presence, had an ugly air of menace. It was as if they were understanding for the first time how strongly her chill self-control had braced them.

"It wasn't your fault, Hank," said Peter. "All of us were thinking what you said. In a fierce strain like this nobody can be blamed for saying what he would never dream of saying at another time."

"It wasn't what you said, anyway," put in Jean. Her voice quavered in spite of her efforts. "It was that radio voice—that awful voice telling her she was the cause of Tim's death—that would have driven anybody mad."

Hank shook his head. "No," he insisted. "No. For the first time in her life Sylvia lost her self-control—and I goaded her on."

For a moment nobody spoke. Then they all jerked with terror, for there came a faint whir from the radio.

"Our numbers," said the voice, "seem somewhat depleted. I see that only four of my guests are left to enjoy what I assure you is the most delightful part of our evening's program—Dr. Murray Chambers Reid, the well-known educator, an outline of whose career may be seen not only in *Who's Who,* but in numerous current publications dealing with leaders in the intellectual world; Miss Jean Trent, Jean Trent of the honeyed voice and the golden charm, lovely Jean Trent, born of a shimmer of starlight and a strayed flower petal——"

"Oh, shut up!" cried Jean.

"—Mr. Peter Daly, who has achieved mention in *Who's Who* in spite of Miss Trent's animosity, Peter Daly of the amusing presence and the high-heralded talent; and Mr. Henry L. Abbott, delightful dilettant known pleasantly as Hank; four opponents, I may say, worthy of my own best efforts; four lives deserving of the most intriguing death.

For do not doubt me, my friends; you shall all be dead before morning."

"Damn you!" muttered Hank. "Damn you!"

They looked at one another with dumb inertia. The atmosphere in the room was thick and close; their only means for admitting air, by opening the door or windows to the patio where lay those coffins and their fearful burdens, was an alternative the very thought of which made them shudder. The prisoned air in the room where they were had grown smotheringly hot, and cigarette smoke hung in thick swirls against the ceiling.

Dr. Reid went to get a cigarette from the corner table. Peter followed him, and stood leaning against the wall, talking in a low voice to the dean. Hank went and sat at Jean's side. He covered one of her hands with his. She glanced up, and gave him a grateful little smile. Hank leaned over and spoke in carefully guarded tones.

"Jean, look at me."

She raised her eyes again.

"What do you think of Peter?"

"I don't know," she returned in a voice hardly above a whisper. "He has a motive for killing me. I told about that. But why should he kill Sylvia—and Margaret and Jason Osgood and that

strange man who fell out of the closet? I'm too terrified to analyze anything, Hank."

"I like Peter," said Hank doubtfully. "But I'm not fond of Dr. Reid, and after what we've seen I can't help thinking that they might both bear watching, Jean. Damn close watching, Jean. I can't see one man doing all this, somehow. It's too perfect."

Jean shivered. "Will you get me a cigarette, Hank? I'm trembling all over."

He rose. "They're on the table, there in the corner where Dr. Reid and Peter are talking. Come with me. Maybe we can hear what they're saying."

She followed him, but as they neared the corner Peter and Dr. Reid walked away and took two chairs together at the other side of the room.

"Go on," Peter was saying in a careful undertone. "What did Hank threaten?"

"It was not precisely a threat," answered Dr. Reid. "He came to my office one day about a week after he had been dismissed. He simply said he thought the world of learning would be greatly enhanced by my death."

Peter nodded. "I'm not trying to pile up evidence against anybody. I'm simply trying to get

things straight. Somebody is doing this—of that we're positive."

"And I still believe," said the dean firmly, "that it is one of us."

"That's a terrible statement, Dr. Reid," said Jean's voice behind him.

He started and turned. She crossed to a chair and sat down.

"You've kept insisting that," she went on. "I wish you'd stop. We're all terrified, and we can't think as it is."

Dr. Reid looked at her steadily. "The reason we cannot think clearly," he said, "is only partly that our faculties are numbed by horror at what we have seen and dread of what is to come. It is also that we are hampered by the interference of the person in this room who has planned our destruction. Whoever this person is, he is joining our discussion under the guise of contributing to it; he is inserting into it false clues to the mystery, throwing us everywhere off our guard."

He looked challengingly at each of the other three in turn.

"You persist in thinking, then," said Peter, "that our assassin is among us?"

"I am sure of it."

"While I still don't agree with you," said Peter, "if you are right you are being very foolish to say everything you think. We all are. We're giving him a beautiful insight into our reactions and our sense of helplessness."

Jean was twisting her handkerchief into knots with nervous fingers. She looked at the pair of foils crossed on the wall above the radio cabinet.

"I—I don't care whether he's here or not," she almost whispered. "We are just as helpless in his hands. We won't help ourselves any by talking or by being quiet. We might as well put those blades into ourselves now as wait."

"Yes," said Hank despairingly. "Something horrible is brooding over this house, something hideous and full of evil—brooding like a bat and swooping on us one at a time. We can't escape. Somebody is watching us, laughing because he sees us struggling and he knows we can't escape him."

"And every one of us who has been trapped to-night," Dr. Reid reminded them, "has done just what was prophesied: laid open his own vulnerable spot. Mrs. Chisholm had one secret, and it killed her. Every one of the others rushed deliberately into his own death. If we could only sit still and

keep our self-control in the face of this horror we might escape it."

Hank got up and poured himself a drink. "Good advice," he said, "but I can't seem to sit still. Every nerve in my body is jerking."

"For myself," went on Dr. Reid, "I am determined to remain where I am—to answer no challenge he gives me in the attempt to save my own life. I shall not walk into death as my unfortunate friends have done. You others might do well to adopt the same course."

"I'm too scared to be analytical," said Hank. "I feel as if something were cracking in my head."

Jean curled her legs under her and sighed exhaustedly. "I can't think or act," she whispered with stiff lips. "I can just wait."

Peter said nothing. He was smoking with rapid, nervous inhalations. The ash trays near him were piled with charred stubs.

Hank flung himself into a chair and dropped his head upon his hands.

"I think I am going mad," he said huskily. "It is as if my brain was rattling in my skull. I can't sit still and I'm afraid to move. Every chair in this room may be a death machine. Any one of these matches may explode when we strike it.

This is a death house, full of traps for death, and there——"

"Oh, Hank, be still!" Jean pled pitifully.

"Be still, can't you?" said Dr. Reid harshly.

Peter reached for another cigarette and lit it off the end of the one he had been smoking.

"My friends," said the voice of the host. Jean screamed and shuddered; Hank started as if he had been struck; Peter and Dr. Reid kept their places as if held by desperate self-control.

"There is no need," said the voice admonishingly, "to be apprehensive as to possible poisons hidden elsewhere in this room. I am astonished that you can believe me so unimaginative as to be unable to invent eight different forms of death, so simple as to be compelled to show you devices that were boresome because already familiar. Pray allow me to assure you that there is no poison hidden in this room, and you may be at ease in selecting any chair you like, any cigarette, any match, any drink. Permit me to repeat that there is only one danger for each of you in this house, the danger that you may not outwit me in the particular contest I have planned for you. None of you is imperiled by the death intended for another member of our company. None of you will die by

accident, and each of you will die as I have intended, or live in spite of me."

The voice ceased; the silence hung ominously over them. Jean huddled farther back into her chair.

"He hears everything we say." The words fairly quivered from her. "He sees everything we do. Oh"—she leaned shaking toward the radio—"*where* are you hidden?"

"You think you're quite safe, don't you?" exclaimed Peter suddenly to the radio. "You think none of us has brains enough to find you! Well—you seem to be right." He followed Hank's example and poured out a drink. As if possessed by sudden torturing nerves he walked to the front window and looked out, staring at the clouds blowing like rags across the sky and then out toward the patio wall.

"We are so close to the pavement," he said. "But we can't get there. It's the consummate artistry of this scheme that maddens me, the deadly self-confidence of this creature. There's no awkwardness about him. He leaves us to grope in the face of his own murderous serenity." He crossed the room and rested an elbow on the radio cabinet. "Damn you!" he said to the dials.

Nobody spoke. They sat in desperate silence, too distrustful of one another to speak. The stillness was more threatening than any confusion of screams and curses. The clock on the wall seemed to tremble; its very ticking sounded breathless. The minutes were sliding past, and they were doing nothing to escape; beaten at every turn, they were simply waiting, and one by one they were dropping away. The little clock was fairly gobbling up the time. Standing by the radio, Peter looked over the smoke-clouded room as though he saw it with something of the hideous blurring of insanity.

"The lights are going out again!" he cried.

Jean's hands went to her tightening throat. With almost imperceptible slowness the lights were fading.

"What time is it?" asked Dr. Reid. His voice was almost inaudible and his face had a dingy look.

"A quarter of two," said Hank.

Nobody moved. Paralyzed with terror, they watched the dying lights. Fear seemed to have drugged them, leaving them heavy and unreasoning. The darkness gathered like the creep of shameless abominations. The room was still but

for their own quick gasping breaths. Their nerves were strained too tight for screams. It grew darker. Then it was black. There was a heave of breath from one of the men and a sort of rattle in Jean's throat. The sounds seemed to intensify the silence. The blackness hung still. Then came a hollow snap and the crash of breaking glass.

A scream and an exclamation of horror broke through the room, and there was the noise of chairs overturned as they fought for security in the blindness. "Is anybody here?" shrieked Jean.

"I am," came Peter's voice. "Jean! Where are you?"

"Here," she cried. "Here! I'm standing still, Peter—can you find me?"

There was a stumbling noise as he tripped over the rug. "Here!" cried Jean again, holding out her hands. An instant later he gripped them.

"Don't let go," he whispered. "Heaven knows what else is about to happen. What's that?"

A low groan had come from the corner by one of the front windows.

"Hank! Dr. Reid!" cried Peter. "Where are you? Which of you is hurt?"

There was no answer. "Look!" screamed Jean. "Peter—the window——"

Their eyes, wide in the darkness, could just make out the faint space that was the window. A black mass against its lower part they knew was the easy-chair where Hank had been sitting; above this, between the curtains, they could make out a hole and a hagged pattern of cracked glass.

"Shot—through that window—" Jean was whispering, but Peter fairly snatched her across the room.

"Hank!" he called. "Hank!"

By the window their hands went out to feel for him. "Here he is—here!" said Jean. "Hank!" she shook him. "Hank!—Ugh-h-h!" She recoiled against Peter.

"What is it? Are you hurt?"

"No—but I felt it, Peter! I can't touch that again—blood—sticky—on his head——"

He put an arm around her shaking body to keep her from falling. The lights clicked on. As Jean and Peter started before the flash, the clock on the wall struck two.

A corner of the rug was kicked over and two chairs lay on their sides. A floor lamp leaned crazily against the sofa. But Jean and Peter hardly saw the disorder of the room; they were

staring at Hank, who was huddled in the chair before them, blood trickling from his head.

"He's not dead," said Peter. "He's breathing. Hank!"

Hank lifted his head and looked vaguely about him, then put a shaky hand to his forehead.

"Lord!" he said, looking bewilderedly at his fingers.

"You weren't killed," said Jean. "Hank—can you understand? He shot through the window, and missed you."

Hank gave a feeble grin. "No, I'm not killed. I thought I was for a minute. Will you give me a drink, Peter? My God!"

He was staring beyond them. They turned to look at what he saw. In the chair behind Jean and Peter slumped Dr. Reid, a red stain spreading on his shirt front.

Peter sprang to him. Hank and Jean watched with horror-stricken faces while Peter tried vainly to find a pulse in the dean's slender white wrist.

"Dead?" asked Jean faintly.

Peter nodded. His eyes went to the broken pane of glass.

"It's easy to see what happened," he said. "The

shot was aimed at Dr. Reid and fired through the window. Hank was in the way, and the bullet just grazed his head. He must have had a Maxim silencer on the gun, or we'd have heard a louder shot."

"Do you feel better, Hank?" Jean asked anxiously.

"Yes. I'm not much hurt, really. Just knocked out of my wits. Will you give me a drink?"

"Of course." She went to the table where the bottles had been placed. "Brandy?"

"Thanks." She brought it to him, and wiped the blood off his forehead with her handkerchief.

"It isn't bleeding much now. The bullet just ripped its way through your hair."

He drained his glass and stood up. "Is that all? I feel like a baby to have made such a racket. I thought I was half killed. Are you sure the doctor's dead, Peter?"

"Yes. The bullet got him, as near as I can tell, in the heart. He must have died instantly."

Hank shuddered. He sank on the sofa.

"I guess I'm behaving like an infant," he said. "But I'm still sort of shaken. And when you see a man dead you hate to remember having said such

things to him as I've been saying to Dr. Reid to-night."

"Stop accusing yourself, Hank!" begged Jean, going to sit by him. "All of us have said things to-night we'd never have said at any other time. All of us—and it hasn't done any good—there are three of us left."

"Three left!" repeated Hank as if in a daze. "Three—and there were eight!"

"Please," quavered Jean, "can't we turn that chair around—or something—so we won't have to see—that?"

"No," said Peter curtly. "Not yet. I want to see something."

Hank looked up. "To see what, Peter?"

Peter looked narrowly at the broken window.

"I want to see what happened when that shot killed Dr. Reid. It all passed so quickly that I didn't think, but something has just occurred to me."

Hank sprang up. "I think I know what you mean. I've just had an idea."

As if by a common impulse he and Peter went to the window and looked out. "I know it isn't pleasant to look at that, Jean," Peter said over his

shoulder, "but I want to let it stay where it is a minute longer."

"It's all right," she said. "I'm not going to faint. I'm calmer now than I have been, I think. I'm all right."

She watched Hank and Peter as they peered through the bullet hole in the window. After a moment they looked at each other.

"We are both asking the same question," said Hank. "That is, where in the name of all that's devastating did he go?"

Peter nodded. There was a strange grimness on his face.

"What is it?" asked Jean, coming toward them.

"Look," said Hank. "Remember Dr. Reid sat facing the window."

She stood on the chair Hank had occupied and peered over their heads through the glass.

"I see," she said. "He must have stood just outside the window to fire the shot——"

"Precisely," interrupted Peter. "The bullet that killed Dr. Reid was fired from above Hank's head. It took a downward course. The hole in the glass is just above the back of Hank's chair. The bullet came in there, grazed the side of Hank's

head, and struck Dr. Reid's heart, which was lower still."

"Yes," said Hank, "the bullet took a downward course, but it couldn't have been fired by a man standing on the patio wall, because it would have hit the floor before it struck Dr. Reid."

"Then," concluded Peter, looking at them both through narrowed eyes, "that means just one thing."

"He's in the patio!" cried Jean.

"He's in the patio," said Hank, "unless he turned off the current in one of the gates and slipped out on the roof."

"Shall we go to look for him?" she exclaimed eagerly. "Please!" She sprang down from the chair. "We can get those foils from above the radio—" As she spoke she was scrambling upon another chair and taking down the foils that were crossed on the wall above the cabinet. "He has a gun," she went on rapidly, "but there are two of you."

She stood on the chair facing them, the foils in her hands. Peter looked dubiously at her.

"Don't be silly," he said crisply. "He has a gun, and foils are no good except at close quarters.

Assuming that he's on the patio, if we went out we'd be offering him our lives like cards on a tray."

She stepped down from the chair and put the foils abruptly on the floor.

"You mean you're scared?"

"Yes," said Peter with laconic candor.

Hank smiled deprecatingly at her set face. "He's right, you know. Peter's really the only fighter among us—you've plenty of courage, but you're such a morsel he could probably throw you over the wall with one hand; and I own I'm just a bit dizzy now."

Jean sat down in a discouraged little heap.

"There's no use in our looking at this any more," said Peter. He gave a shove to the chair opposite the window so that it turned to face the wall.

Jean had rested her chin wearily on her hand. "Do you think," she asked in a tremulous little voice, "he has been there all the time?"

"I don't know," said Hank. "I don't understand any of this. I suppose nobody does—but our host."

"But of course your host understands," came from the radio.

"Oh, to hell with you!" cried Hank, springing

up. "Tell us, then—tell us! How did Dr. Reid die?"

"From the effect of a pistol shot, my friend."

He sank back into his chair with a smothered groan. "He'll drive me insane," he said weakly.

"I—I know," said Jean. "I keep thinking I can't stand it another minute, and then that I'll have to——"

Her voice trailed off. She looked at Peter, who was standing near the bedroom door, his eyes fixed with frightening intensity on the radio.

"I must apologize," went on the voice of the host, "for the slight inconvenience caused to my young friend. However, in order that my antagonist should lose the game with as little inconvenience to himself as possible, it was necessary that his death be instantaneous and therefore painless. In order to strike the region of the heart I was forced to take careful aim. I could just make out the outline of Mr. Abbott's head in the darkness, and I knew that I must strike him, but I knew also that his wound would be so slight as to deserve to be called a scratch."

"It's horrible, Hank!" cried Jean. "He might have killed you."

"He hasn't—not yet," said Hank grimly.

"And now, our pleasant company is reduced to three. Three delightful guests. As I shall not require your attention again for perhaps half an hour, might I suggest, say, a little three-handed bridge?"

"Be still!" cried Jean, springing up. "Be still! I'd like to kill you," she added slowly, "with my own two hands." Her fear seemed to have burned up in her anger. She glared at the radio in white helpless fury.

Peter took a sudden step forward.

"Will you kill all of us after half an hour, Voice?" he demanded.

"Oh, be quiet," murmured Hank exhaustedly. "Don't start that voice again." He rested his forehead on his hand. "I'm afraid he scratched me deeper than I thought," he added.

"Did he?" said Peter, coming toward Hank with a face of concern. "If we hadn't been scared out of our wits we'd have known you shouldn't be allowed to sit around like that. Something ought to be done for that head of yours, or it'll start bleeding again."

"I'm all right," said Hank. "It just left me with a headache."

"Didn't"—Jean hesitated before the name—

"didn't Margaret say there was some adhesive plaster and stuff in the bathroom, when she was in there?"

"Did she?" said Peter. "I don't remember." He smiled faintly. "It was such a long time ago, so it seems to me."

"Poor Margaret," murmured Hank.

"Come into the bedroom," urged Peter. "We've got to fix up your head."

"Let me come too," begged Jean. "I'm scared to stay in here alone. Suppose that—that creature should come in from the patio."

"Certainly you're scared," said Peter. "So should I be. Come, Hank. We can't have you fainting."

Jean opened the door to the bedroom and stood impatiently on the threshold while Hank got to his feet.

"Come on," she begged. "I can't stay in here —with that thing in the chair."

They followed her into the bedroom. Hank dropped gratefully on the edge of the bed and waited while Peter brought iodine and a roll of adhesive tape from the cabinet over the lavatory.

"Here's the stuff," he said. "No scissors to cut the tape, but I guess I can tear it."

"Why don't you use a table knife?" suggested Jean.

"And go in that kitchen?" said Hank with a shrug. "I'd rather not."

"Adhesive tape is awful to tear," persisted Jean. "If Peter puts a strip on your head and then tries to tear it off the roll he's likely to pull it off your wound and start it bleeding again." She knitted her brows suddenly. "I think I remember seeing some cutlery in the silver drawer of the buffet. Don't you remember—Margaret dropped her coffee spoon and Hawkins got her another."

"Observant youngster, you," remarked Hank smiling, and Peter added, "I'll see if there's a knife in the drawer. Wait a minute."

"We'll all go," said Hank rising. "Things have a way of jumping out of the wall in this place."

Peter acquiesced good-humoredly. "All right. So they do."

Hank and Jean walked to the door and watched Peter as he went to the buffet in the dining alcove. "In the top right drawer, I think," called Jean. She glanced at Hank. "Does your head hurt very much?"

"Aches like hell," he answered, smiling down on her. "That's all. Jean, I declare you're as pretty

now as you were when you came in, in spite of all the terrors you've been through."

"Thank you. I'd forgotten I looked like anything at all. It has been so dreadful." She was keeping her eyes carefully averted from the chair that held what had been Dr. Reid, though only its back could be seen from where she stood.

"Here's the best I could find," said Peter, coming back to them with a table knife in his hand. "Probably won't cut anything tougher than pastry, but we'll try it. Now, Hank, bring that headache of yours back to the bed. Here, Jean, you hold the iodine. You can put it on with the cork—no, there are some towels on the rack in the bathroom. We needn't mind staining one of them."

"I'll get a towel," she offered, and went for it as Hank sat again on the edge of the bed and Peter started to peel the tape from the roll. "Here it is," added Jean, coming back from the bathroom. "There's no water, or I'd have wet the towel and washed his forehead. I tried the taps, but the water's cut off."

"He told us it was," Hank reminded her.

"I could get some mineral water out of a bottle," she said apologetically, "but I'm not going out there by myself."

"I wish you two wouldn't be so worried about me," urged Hank. "He didn't hurt me much. Nothing but this blasted headache."

Jean wiped blood and a smudge of powder from Hank's forehead. "Do you know anything about making a plaster, Peter?" she queried. "I don't."

Peter smiled noncommittally. "Not much, but I'll do my best. Put some iodine on the place."

She obeyed. "Do I hurt you, Hank?"

"Hardly at all. It stings a bit, but that's to be expected. An iodine sting isn't half as bad as dying."

Peter twisted his face wryly. "I'll say it isn't. Stop talking like that. I'm too nervous now to put on a straight piece of tape. A little more iodine here in front, Jean."

She complied and moved back toward the door as Peter laid a strip of adhesive along the wound. "This isn't much, Hank," he said, "but it ought to do till you can see a doctor. Hold your head still, or I'm likely to hurt you—rest it in your hands. There, that's better." He leaned over, carefully placing the tape. "This adhesive stuff is mighty handy to have around the house. Lucky he left us some iodine, too; he must have foreseen that he was likely to hurt somebody and wanted to be

prepared—there, you damned fool, now try any more of your nonsense!"

Hank leaped upon him with a shout of rage and terror, for Peter with a deft quick movement had wrapped the tape across his eyes. Peter flung him back across the bed and with his knee on Hank's heaving chest he pinned his hands together. Another wrap of tape bound them fast.

"Damn you—you murderous fiend!" Hank was roaring, striving with a mad struggle to get his hands to his eyes.

"Be still!" shouted Peter. "You can't get away now—I've yards of this—be still!" He wrenched the strip in two and strapped Hank's arms to his body. "There! Quit fighting—I've got you!" With another wrench he tore the roll free and bound Hank's feet together. The table knife clattered to the floor. Peter stepped back and looked at the writhing figure on the bed. "You may as well be quiet, you know." With leisurely care he passed the tape again and again around Hank's impotent body, blandly ignoring his roars of baffled rage. Then, rising, he looked down with an expression of infinite contempt which Hank could not see. "You don't look at all pretty, you know. Sorry to spoil your suit—this sticky stuff

will never come off—but, as I said, a nice fat roll of adhesive is a mighty handy thing around a house."

Hank struggled to a sitting position and tried to find the floor with his helpless feet.

"You bloody killer—you snarling demon—where are you? I wish I could see your ugly face!"

"But you can't, you know. No, don't try to get up."

Peter leaned over and pushed him back upon the bed. He looked down at Hank, smiling.

There was a step on the threshold.

"Don't move!" ordered a voice keen and hard as a knife blade.

Astounded, Peter turned and looked over his shoulder. There, her eyes blazing and her mouth set in a straight ugly line, was Jean, and in her hand, its point touching his back, was one of the two foils she had taken from the wall above the radio.

"If you move I'll kill you. We've had enough of this. Now it's time for a show-down."

CHAPTER NINE

HANK started up with an exclamation, but Peter simply stood and stared, his eyes glued amazedly on Jean. She did not quiver. Slowly, her eyes steadily looking into his, she moved around till the point of the foil was touching his side.

"Let go of Hank," she ordered tersely.

Peter straightened up.

"In God's name," Hank wrenched out, "what is she doing?"

"I have a foil touching Peter's ribs," she said. "If he doesn't do as I say, he is the one who dies next. Peter!"

"Good heavens above, Jean!" broke from Peter. There suddenly seemed to him something ludicrous about the small stern figure of Jean, with her angry eyes and the tendrils of her short dark hair curling over her eyebrows, as she stood there, despite the blade pricking his coat. But as he looked at her he knew that Jean had no intention of being laughed at.

"Don't pretend to be horrified," she said

crisply. "If you try to grab me I'll kill you. Take that strap off Hank's eyes."

"That's a good girl," approved Hank, struggling into a sitting posture. "I'd really like to see what's going on."

"I'll be damned if I'll turn him loose," said Peter.

"I didn't say turn him loose. I said unblind him. Go ahead. I mean it."

Peter realized she did mean it. Slowly he bent forward and ripped the tape from across Hank's face. She followed him with the blade.

"There went most of my eyebrows," sighed Hank.

"That's done," snapped Peter. "And not another inch of tape will I rip off him. I'd as soon be killed by you as by him."

"Would you?" asked Jean, and there was none of its celebrated melody in her voice.

"Yes," said Peter, meeting her gaze angrily. "You stop your grinning, you ghastly death hound!" he burst out as he looked again at Hank. "For God's sake, Jean, come to your senses! Don't you realize this creature has already killed five of your friends to-night?"

"What?" gasped Hank, staring from Peter to

the motionless figure of Jean. "It's somewhat absurd to accuse a man of murder, you know, when you've come within an inch of killing him yourself."

"You——"

"Be quiet, Peter," cut in Jean. "Hank, are you convinced Peter is responsible for what's happened to-night?"

"Yes. I don't know how he did all of it, but I've just understood how he killed Dr. Reid."

"That's enough," said Jean. "Peter?"

"Of course Hank did it. It dawned on me about the time Dr. Reid was shot. I think we've been blind idiots not to have seen it before. That's why I wouldn't go out on the patio to look for any mythical host. That's why I insisted he come in here to have his head dressed. I didn't hear Margaret say there was adhesive in the bathroom and I meant to tear up a sheet to bind him, but when you mentioned adhesive I realized how much better it would be for handcuffs than anything else we had."

"Can you prove it?"

"Not all of it, but I can tell you enough to convince you that nobody but Hank could be guilty."

"Very well. Hank, you are harmless for the

moment. I'm going to stand here with the tip of this foil touching you, Peter, and unless one of you can prove to me that the other has planned and executed to-night's series of horrors, I'll stand here till the servants wake or till somebody breaks into this apartment. Hank, prove to me it's Peter's doing."

"I think, Jean, that he is a madman. All evening I've been completely in the dark as to who was doing this dreadful thing. So were you, and so were the rest of us—because we were attempting to judge this mad creature by ourselves."

They were listening, Peter with a face of infinite contempt, Jean with her cold, calculating eyes never swerving from Peter. Hank went on.

"We were trying to ferret out what might have tempted one of us to do anything so horrible, and how we might conceivably have gone about doing it. We didn't realize that none of the rest of us could have done it. A madman is notoriously ingenious. That's why we haven't been able to understand.

"I think I can tell you how he made the voice. Some harmless-looking bit of apparatus in the front room, disguised to look like a trick of decoration, was a microphone, and he has been switching

it on and whispering into it. The radio amplified his voice. That's why it was so unnatural. There may have been dozens of disguised mikes in the room, and he could stand in any one of a dozen places while he talked. He produced the gong by tapping on the mike ever so gently with a little steel bar, or perhaps with his nail.

"You remember, he has explained all of the deaths that took place to-night except Dr. Reid's. He couldn't explain Dr. Reid's death. He wanted us to think Dr. Reid was killed by someone outside the room. We went to the window and decided the host must be hidden in the patio. I came in here, terrified of some mysterious person outside. Like an imbecile, I put myself in Peter's hands. If you hadn't come in when you did the chances are I wouldn't be alive now. I didn't suspect Peter till he jerked his damned adhesive over my eyes. Then, of course, I knew he was going to try to kill me, and suddenly it flashed upon me how Peter had killed Dr. Reid."

"How?" asked Jean. In spite of her there was a thrill of eagerness in the word.

"The room was absolutely dark," said Hank. "The curtains were drawn, and it is a cloudy night. Peter slipped noiselessly around to the window

behind my chair, raised it slightly, and sat on the sill. He had the pistol in his hand. He sat on the sill and pulled the window down in front of him till the edge of the sash rested on his knees, leaned back and fired through the glass. Then he raised the window noiselessly, slipped back inside and put it down again. After hiding the pistol he stumbled around in the dark till he found you. If he made any noise fixing the window I don't remember hearing it, but my nerves were in such a state that I wasn't noticing much of anything."

"Good Lord, Hank, is that the best you can do?" Peter was laughing with a sort of sardonic relief.

"What? What are you trying to——"

"Don't interrupt me; it's my turn. I listened quietly to your song and dance act and now it's time you listened to me. You see, I know you planned this ghastly party. I know you have driven five of my friends to their death to-night. And I know you had planned to kill Jean and me."

"Go on, Peter!" said Jean breathlessly. She still held the foil to his side, but the jubilant assurance in his voice had roused her confidence.

"I'll begin at the beginning. Do be careful of that foil, Jean. At first I was dubious about whether any member of our party could be the host

who was intending so joyfully to kill us all. I knew them, you see, and I couldn't believe that one of my friends could have evolved such a diabolical scheme. Then, suddenly, very early in what was referred to as our game, it occurred to me that nobody who could take such a fiendish delight in murder could get his own consent to stage this affair to-night and not be here to watch his victims die. That's a character of the sadistic mind—it isn't satisfied to know people are suffering. It must look on, and enjoy every terrible writhe of its victims. I couldn't understand how it was done, but I knew that the creature behind that terrible voice must be in the room with us. That's why I kept insisting that he wasn't. I hoped that the murderer would agree with me in the effort to throw me off guard, but Hank was clever. He insisted volubly that the assassin must be inside.

"The first direct piece of evidence to support my belief that the murderer was one of us was the eight coffins in the patio. If the murderer really intended to kill all eight of us there should have been nine coffins, for there would have been nine bodies, and the symmetry of the event was too well planned for him to leave one more body than

coffins. Obviously, somebody was planning to leave alive, so that the servants could testify that they served dinner to eight people, and there would have been eight bodies to prove they were all dead. Obviously, too, the person who was going to escape would be a man. None of the servants had seen us closely enough to swear as to our features.

"So I watched—how I watched!—to see if the murderer wouldn't make some slip. If I had only had my wits about me I might have known it was Hank hours ago. But I didn't. I was too panicky to see. Hank has been giving himself away all evening, but I couldn't see it for a long time. But suddenly, a little while ago, I saw."

"What?" gasped Jean.

Hank was listening intently, with an enigmatic smile.

"That Hank Abbott has stage-managed this whole infernal show! It came to me abruptly, like a break of light, that Hank was the only person in the room that the voice ever answered directly. Don't you remember? Hank leaped up in what he pretended was a frenzy of terror, shouting, '—and here we sit!' and the voice answered, 'Sit quite still, my friends.' It never answered the rest of us like that. I wasn't suspicious then—if only I had

been! Hank got Margaret to sit in the chair that held the small amplifier—don't you remember, when we came inside after Osgood's death how solicitously he led you to the sofa and drew forward a chair for Sylvia and one for Margaret? Hank was in France with Major Chisholm's regiment, when Chisholm was so strangely killed in action at a time when there wasn't any action in his sector. If Gaylord Chisholm learned the truth then and blew out his own brains, Hank might have learned it too. If I only hadn't been so scared, I might have known.

"But the voice kept answering him, and it never answered us. My suspicions crystallized when Hank shot himself. Then, about that time, you wanted to go out and look for the host in the patio. Imagine putting a blade into this creature's hand and going out into the dark with him! I said I'd be scared to go outside, and I was mighty right. It was then that Hank leaped to the radio with a direct question—'Tell us, how did he die?' and instantly the voice answered, 'By a pistol shot, my friend.' I was sure then, but to clamp finality on my certainty I asked a question—the first I could think of—and the voice had no answer. Instead, Hank pretended to be groaning in agony and said,

'Don't start him talking again,' or something like that. Then I knew, beyond the shadow of a question, that Hank had prepared that infernal voice beforehand.

"So I looked at Hank, and saw a powder burn on the front of his temple—something he'd never have had if he had been shot from the window behind him. You wiped the powder off yourself. So I got him in here and got out the adhesive, which is considerably better for strapping up a criminal than handkerchiefs and torn sheets. Now, Hank, *what* would you like to say?"

Hank did not answer. He sat looking curiously at Peter, that sneering smile still on his face.

"I beg your pardon, Peter," said Jean. She lowered the foil.

Peter laughed triumphantly. "Would you like to say something, Hank, before we get the police?"

"Why, yes," said Hank pleasantly. "Simply that you can't get them. You can't get out, you know."

"No, but we can stay here and keep guard over you till somebody comes to look for us."

Hank shrugged. "Well—" He looked up at them, his satiric smile gleaming. "At least, you can't deny that I've cleaned up the town."

"What do you mean?" demanded Peter.

"Just that. Don't stand there glaring at me. You've won. Why don't you sit down and enjoy the confidence of your triumph? You're going to hang the greatest benefactor this city has had in this generation."

"What *are* you talking about?" breathed Jean. She pulled forward a chair and sank into it, wearily.

"Curious, isn't it," said Hank, "how the dear public will howl for my hanging, unmindful of the service I've wrought them. Don't you know who they were, that crew I've mercifully reduced to the elements? The epitome of narrowness, dishonesty and crookedness—in their heyday they've cost New Orleans more in broken hearts and misspent cash than the town can recover from in a decade."

Peter drew up another chair and sat down, never taking his eyes from Hank. "We are listening," he said.

"Of course you know how many perfectly nice girls have had their social careers ruined by the influence of that bigamous Chisholm woman! Don't tell me you never bemoaned the extent to which intellectual research has stagnated at the

university because no idea consecrated by less than a generation of acceptance could penetrate the mummified mind of Murray Chambers Reid. And don't look amazed when I tell you that Jason Osgood clutched his millions over the tracks of dollar-hallowed thievery. And surely, nobody in New Orleans who has the intelligence of a half-weaned calf doesn't know that with the elimination of the Slamon-Inglesby combine the taxpayers get a chance for a break at last."

"But Sylvia said she was poor!" exclaimed Jean, gazing at him as if half hypnotized.

"Oh, Lord, when she told that tale I wanted to stand up and call her a liar. Wait till they probate her will. For years that poverty story has been her way of sounding innocent whenever somebody got nerve enough to mention graft. In the past ten years she's wrenched enough money out of the public pocket to buy half the city. Oh, I've killed them, yes, but with the same feeling I'd have if I'd stepped on a nest of spiders."

He stopped, his hands clenched like those of a martyred zealot. With an effort he brought his fists up toward his face. Jean sprang to her feet with a cry.

"Hank! Peter—he swallowed something!"

Peter rushed toward him. Hank laughed mockingly into his face.

"My friends, I make good the promise that if you won the game I should die in sight of you."

CHAPTER TEN

"WHAT did he do, Jean?" exclaimed Peter. "You saw him."

"I'm not sure—but it looked as if he was biting that ring on his right hand. Then he swallowed—I'm sure of that."

Hank cocked a provoking eyebrow. "Clever little girl," he said easily. "That's just what I did do. See?"

He wriggled his bound hands toward them. The setting of the ring gaped, showing an empty space, and on his finger was a faint trace of white powder.

"Kept for emergency, you see. You don't believe I'd end this delightful evening with a trip in a police wagon, do you? And the prospect of some weeks in a bedbuggy cell with a lot of lawyers wrangling and a lot of club women consoling me? Surely, my friends, you aren't so stupid as to think I could plan charming deaths for you all and omit one equally as pleasant for myself, in case I lost our game? Don't be silly."

For an instant they stared at him, speechless.

Then Jean gasped out, "Hank! Your voice—it's not the voice of the host!"

Hank surveyed her with cool amusement. "Of course not, innocent. You don't think I'd have let our host speak with my voice, do you?"

"But Hank," she cried, "where did you get that voice?"

"Don't you wish you knew, little girl?"

"Damn," said Peter irrelevantly.

"Now, Peter," murmured Hank. "What business have you to be annoyed? Haven't you just had the privilege of attending the most original party ever given in New Orleans? Haven't you managed to save your precious life in the face of an exquisitely designed scheme to murder you? Haven't you also saved for the American theater one of the most justly celebrated of its efflorescent stars? And haven't you just seen your would-be murderer swallow a bit of powder which will end his annoying life in a couple of hours? To be sure," continued Hank with quiet relish, "when you and Jean are finally discovered here, with my own corpse among those of my guests, I really don't see how you are going to convince the police that you two weren't behind this spicy evening yourselves."

Peter gasped involuntarily.

For a moment another of those threatening dead silences sank upon them. Jean and Peter stared at Hank, who watched them with evident amusement. At last he spoke.

"However," said Hank, "I don't care what happens to you after I'm dead. My share of enjoyment of our party came by watching it happen. While I regret that you two stepped in and spoilt it just when I was having the time of my life, still, I won't embarrass you."

"What will you do?" burst out Jean. "Oh, Hank, don't torment us so!"

Hank smiled at her. "It would be a shame, wouldn't it, to rob the world of its knowledge of my genius. So, with your kind permission, I'll leave you a written confession that I committed the penthouse murders—what a lovely headline that is going to make! Too bad I shan't be there to see it—and I shall explain to the world at large just how the most delightfully original murders of the generation were almost carried to a successful conclusion. I shall prove I was a better actor than Jean, a better thinker than Reid, a better strategist than Slamon, a better liar than Sylvia, a better gossip than Maggie, a better bargainer than Os-

good, and almost a better playwright than Peter."

"Where have you put that confession?" interrupted Peter, who was standing eagerly.

"Nowhere, Peter. Don't excite yourself. You don't think I'd have written one beforehand, do you? I wasn't expecting any of my guests to outwit me in our game. But I'll make one now." He paused tantalizingly. "You wouldn't unbind me, I suppose?"

"Certainly not," said Peter.

"You seem in a really abominable mood tonight. I don't see how I'm going to write out a confession with my hands clamped like this. You'd better make up your minds, for I assure you I won't last much longer."

He grinned maliciously. Jean and Peter shuddered as they looked at him on the edge of the bed, ludicrously terrifying with the patch of plaster on his forehead and the sticky white strips around his impeccable dinner jacket. Peter had strapped his arms to his sides as far as the elbows, and his hands, bound at the wrists, stuck out in front of him like a beggar's holding a cup for alms. His feet, bound at the ankles, rested crookedly on the floor. Jean, huddled in a chair near the bed, her

arms around her knees, bit her lips in vague apprehension.

Hank chuckled derisively. "I think I ought to write out the formula for the poison I bit out of my ring and recommend it to all clever young persons who simply can't stand the stupid associations of the world in which they have been required to live. It's very pleasant in its effects. I never felt better in my life. But in an hour or so, I shall curl up before you and go to sleep. A charming way of thumbing one's nose at an unimaginative world——"

"Will you shut up?" cried Peter desperately.

"I won't. I've already told you that I want to leave a detailed account of my genius to posterity. You won't loosen my hands so I can write it. But I might dictate my last message to the world. You can write it, and I think I can wiggle my hand around the pen sufficiently to sign it."

"All right. Is there some paper somewhere?"

"Yes, on top of that little desk behind me. Paper and a fountain pen. I thought somebody might want to leave a dying message for his friends."

Peter brought a sheaf of writing paper and the

pen back to his chair by the bed. "I'm ready," he said grimly.

"Lord!" said Hank. "I hate to do this." He paused a moment. "I want to, and at the same time I don't. I might take my secret with me, and leave the world mystified forever—but oh, I love to know that with my confession in your hand you will hear me laughing at you from my grave! Oh, I know you so well—I can sit here and prophesy what you will do with that confession when you finally have it—I have known all this evening what every one of my guests would do. How well I knew you all! All of you here, childishly believing that you could do as you liked at any time—baffled by that myth of free will theologians used to prate about! Yet you behaved as you had to behave; in every move of this evening's game I knew what you were going to do, because I knew you would respond to circumstances as your particular temperaments led you. Of course you did what you wanted to—because not one of you could want to do anything that was not predetermined by your psychology. How I have hated you and how I have laughed at you to-night—doing every minute what I had planned that you should do, because you couldn't help it!"

Jean sat tensely lacing and unlacing her fingers. "Hank," she exclaimed as he paused, "why do you hate us so?"

He laughed bitterly. Then suddenly he began to talk again, rapidly, vehemently, as if he was at last saying what he had waited a long time to say.

"Because you wallowed in your success and refused to let me share it. Oh, don't interrupt me—but for you whom I brought here to kill I should not still be Hank Abbott, motley clown of the Quarter. You would not listen to me. You thought it was my profession to be funny. I wrote you a scenario and you never even read it. Funny Hank Abbott, trying to write a story for the exquisite Jean Trent! I told Peter I thought I had a good idea, and sketched the scenario for him and he made a short story out of it—but did he say 'thank you'? Imagine funny old Hank's even recognizing it! I know more about modern economics than anybody in Dr. Reid's hidebound university, but Jason Osgood had endowed the chair I occupied and he couldn't have me exposing the tricks by which financiers squeeze the public. I might have sued the university; I mentioned it to Sylvia and she laughed and tweaked my ear and

told me to go on painting fountains, and she told Tim and between them they made a perfectly killing parlor story out of it. Funny old Hank! Playboy of the town—and with more brains than the lot of you together. I couldn't even amuse myself as an extra man at the smartest parties because of Margaret Chisholm's attitude that I didn't quite belong. Damn you—damn all of you, laughing at me! 'You are charming, Hank, but you must admit you are scatterbrained.' How often I have heard that—the mocking tolerance of superior people toward a professional entertainer. You wanted me to make wisecracks while you made careers. You'd be very kind to me if I'd only remember my place. I know. Damn you! Forever and forever it was you who held me down, the seven of you whom I gathered here to-night. You stamped on me, flattened me again and again to the dull level of mediocrity where you knew I had no place but where it amused you to have me stay."

"In heaven's name, Hank—" broke in Peter, but Hank went on hotly.

"Don't interrupt me! I've started telling this and I'll finish. God, it's a relief to say it to your faces. I wish the rest of them could hear me. I

knew I had more brains than all of you. I hated you—how I hated you! I knew that if all of us met on an equal plane I could prove myself. So I got you here. I barred every means of exit. I arranged a game in which nothing but innate superiority would matter. And I won. I matched my brains against yours, and I conquered—until you noticed the only flaw in my beautiful scheme. You made some pretty clever detections. I grant you that you were right about Gaylord Chisholm. Jimmy Vickers got himself killed not long after he'd told Chisholm what he knew and neither of them suspected I'd overheard. You were right about the voice made in advance, too. Oh, I've been saving all this up for years: I've lost now, but while it lasted I'd never felt such glee. You've robbed me of the fruits of my experiment, but it was——"

"*Fruits*?" repeated Peter hoarsely. He and Jean were listening half hypnotized to Hank's outburst.

"Oh, you imbecile! To think that my game was ended by a blunderhead who can't see what twenty-four hours' advance knowledge of these deaths to-night would mean to any man! Imagine now—before daylight—being able to clean out Sylvia

Inglesby's safe—I could have blackmailed half our leading citizens. You didn't know, of course, that Sylvia and Tim each carried half of the combinations of their two safes everywhere they went, but I took pains to find that out. Tim's papers would probably have provided as much fun as Sylvia's. Think of what you could do at City Hall if you had them in your hands. If I could have cleared out Jason Osgood's files before daylight I'd have been a millionaire by Thursday. He's the small fry leader in a cotton pool that his death won't swerve an iota. And without Margaret Chisholm's complacent assumption that I was just not quite—" he broke off for an instant and then rushed on with a sort of ecstatic violence. "I could have held this city in my hands. There would have been nothing denied to me. All I'd have had to do was to step out and take what I wanted. By outwitting all of you for one single evening I would have stepped into the treasure house of your united labors. There is nothing I could not have had, nothing I could not have done in New Orleans. The town would have been on my knees."

"Please!" cried Jean in a voice of horror.

"No," said Hank bitterly, "I'm going to die. I'm going to die, and nobody will ever hold this

town in his hands—because by the time you two spread the news that our friends are dead it will be too late for anyone to take advantage of it—unless, of course, you want to."

"No," said Peter quietly, "we don't."

"I suppose you don't. It requires courage, Peter, to be magnificently wicked. Oh!" he started suddenly.

"What is it, Hank?" exclaimed Jean.

"A sort of cold flash. That's all right—I'll last awhile longer. Are we going to write that confession of mine, Peter, or aren't we?"

Peter shook the pen to bring the ink to the dry point. "I'm ready. Don't talk too fast."

"I'll go slowly. Write. Write, you fool, write it, and learn how beautifully I tricked you all!"

"Ready," said Peter, and in spite of him there was a tense sort of dread in his voice. He gave his chair a half turn and rested the paper on the top of the dressing table. He looked up.

Hank dictated, slowly and with a sort of cynical assurance.

"Being about to die by my own hand, I wish hereby to confess that to-night, Saturday, March 15, I have planned and executed the deaths of the men and women whose bodies will be found with

mine in the penthouse occupying the twenty-second floor of the Bienville Building, Carondelet Street, New Orleans. I alone am guilty of this series of crimes, and no other person knew of my purpose or assisted me to accomplish it.

"Got that?"

"Yes," said Peter. His voice was unsteady. He found the writing of this confession a curiously awful procedure. Hank went on imperturbably.

"When I said that no one assisted me to accomplish my purpose I meant that no one gave me conscious assistance. But the fulfillment of my purpose to-night was accomplished only with the collaboration of the persons I have killed, or who, I might say with more accuracy, who killed themselves with the apparatus I had provided.

"I have long been convinced that human beings respond to circumstances in accordance with unvariable laws of their individual psychologies, and that if one took the trouble to study the reactions of his friends he would be able to foresee with certainty astonishing to the uninitiate their reactions to any given set of occurrences. Obviously, then, if one could arrange beforehand a combination of circumstances, which should affect only a group of persons whose psychological reac-

tions one knew, one could foretell with almost rigid accuracy just what would happen. This is what I have done to-night. I planned for my guests to walk deliberately into death. The bodies lying in this penthouse to-night are those of men and women who came here to a party which each believed was being given in his honor by a host who sent him an anonymous telegram congratulating him on an unnamed achievement. I knew they would come, for I had selected guests with well-developed egos, every one of whom was conscious that he was constantly deserving congratulations. They came; the door was locked behind them, and each of them walked open-eyed into death, led there by a quirk of personality impossible to resist even in the face of annihilation. I came here to, pretending to be a guest, for I had sent myself a telegram like those they had received.

"Not until after the doors were shut did they realize the character of the party. While they were wondering who the sender of the telegrams might be, a voice speaking over the radio wished them a pleasant evening and informed them that they were listening to the voice of their host."

"Yes," said Peter. Hank nodded. As he went on a note of polite derision crept into his tone.

"It was my voice, disguised and broadcast by mechanics so simple that it amused me mightily to observe that the most ingenious minds of New Orleans could not guess them. But I had known they would not, for I had selected guests whose careers had been spent in the tworls of ludicrous half possibilities, and who could therefore be expected to overlook the obvious. I had arranged the speeches of the host on a series of phonograph records, connected by wire with the radio in this apartment. The voice annoyed them; it grated on them, it maddened them because they could not recognize it. It was not my voice; it was a sneering, insolent voice, not, I may say, an altogether pleasant voice. To produce it I used a devise used by children in their nurseries. I spoke into a glass tumbler. If anyone will speak into a drinking glass, holding it so that one side of the rim is pressed to the corner of his lips and the other side raised an inch or so, he will produce a ghostly voice laden with arrogant menace. That is how I produced the voice of the host."

Hank paused again. "Charming," he commented. "Even the broken relics of a beautiful crime are reminiscently beautiful, are they not? Go on, Peter?"

"I'm ready," said Peter, in the voice of a man afraid to say more.

"Under the name of Roger Calvert—chosen at random from a tombstone—I had taken the suite directly under the penthouse and had placed there the phonographs on which my records were to be played. You who read this may play the records again if you like. You'll find there three microphones in a circle of talking machines. Each machine is controlled by a switch in this penthouse, and will change its own records. One of the microphones is in action. The others are strung for emergency.

"The machine playing the records which my guests heard to-night was equipped with this series, each record designed to follow the other in perfect sequence as the crime developed. For in planning these murders I had a simple task; there was nothing more intricate than arranging the lines in the same fashion that a playwright arranges them. With myself to act as a feed to the records, the voice came in with ready precision to clinch each situation.

"For emergency two of the talking machines had records that would straighten out any difficult situation. Had I needed to dispose of Dr. Reid earlier

in the game, suitable remarks were ready. Had someone died trying to get through an outside door before it was intended, that likewise would have been followed by appropriate comments. All these machines will be found in the office that bears a sign on the door reading 'The Southern Musical Distributing Company, Talking Machines and Radios. Wholesale only.' The coffins came from St. Louis crated like phonographs. I shipped them myself. The electrical work was most elementary except for the control switches, for it was important that there should be no slip-up there. I had an expert technician from New York arrange these switches, explaining to him that it was rigging for a joke I was to play on some friends. The wiring of the exits I fixed myself by tapping the high-tension line. When the expert had finished his work, I had him open the door. Dressed properly, later in the evening he became my ninth guest and tumbled out of the closet when the door was unlocked."

He cast up his eyes abstractedly, with the air of a man excavating fragments in precise order from his memory. "And what shall I explain next? Oh, yes—write, Peter. Hurry—my hands are getting cold."

With a jerk of nerves Peter gave the pen a vicious shake that spattered points of ink on Jean's skirt.

"I'm sorry," he muttered.

"No matter," said Jean breathlessly.

"The servants, who had been engaged by telephone from an agency, found written instructions on the kitchen table, which had been typewritten by the old device of visiting a series of agencies and trying out the typewriters. By following their directions the servants were prevented from interfering with my plans for the evening, for they were told that in return for their services a special bottle of old brandy had been saved for them, which they might drink with their own dinner. The butler was made responsible for seeing to it that they drank nothing until after the guests had been served. Their brandy, like other drinks that had been left for them, contained a narcotic, and so they were made harmless and were put out of the way for the rest of the night."

"Wait!" Peter put in abruptly. "You'll let them out—and us?"

"Suppose I don't? Somebody will smash the door, eventually."

"Hank—tell us where the switch is!" cried Jean.

"Don't make us wait here—for hours and hours——"

"You can wait till I finish dictating, can't you?" said Hank with wrenched exasperation. "Please go on, Peter. Haven't I done all you could ask of me in getting myself out of your way? Go on, Peter. I'll tell you later, when I've finished."

He went on impatiently. "The switch that electrified the outside doors I turned on unobserved after the last of my guests had arrived. I was prepared to thwart every effort they could make to escape.

"The first of our party to die was Jason Osgood, the financier, who in attempting to take the lives of all his fellow guests in a frenzied effort to save himself, received a bit of the poison on the outside of the bottle which the voice of the host had warned them contained prussic acid. Of course I had foreseen that one of the party, quicker of observation than the rest, would realize that the murderer who had announced by radio that he was going to take all their lives must be in the room observing what went on, and would attempt to kill his intended assassin by doing away with the entire party. It seemed likely that Mr. Osgood would do this, for he was notoriously a man desperately

careful of his own safety at any cost, but if one of the others had done it I had records with the suitable follow-up. I had placed the poison at his hand. Though he got us all out of the room while he mixed his drinks, when I from the patio entrance saw him go into the kitchen and return with a tray of cocktails I exulted to know my first bit of psychological deduction had apparently not gone awry, and when I lifted the glass he gave me and smelt a faint trace of acid, I knew it.

"The next of our group to answer the urge of death was Mrs. Gaylord Chisholm. Mrs. Chisholm died because she had made the error of having but one interest in life, and when that came toppling about her ears she could not live. For twenty years Mrs. Chisholm had given all her talents, all her money, all her energy, toward building a magnificent structure of supremacy; when I whispered in her ear that it stood on a foundation of toothpicks Mrs. Chisholm's reason for living was gone. Her heart was weak, yes; but no whisper can stop a weak heart unless the whisper is of fearful purport. I told Margaret Chisholm——"

"Don't put that in," said Jean. "Her husband's relatives are still living, Hank."

"—a dreadful secret," finished Hank with a

shrug. "Mrs. Chisholm heard her imperious pinnacles cracking around her. She heard her friends laughing at her. She saw her sacrosanct name on the front pages. She saw herself—Mrs. Gaylord Chisholm, the magnificent, the unassailable—ruined.

"So Mrs. Gaylord Chisholm died, because she wanted to die.

"Tim Slamon and Miss Sylvia Inglesby, like Mr. Osgood, executed their own deaths without any direct action on my part. Mr. Slamon, like many men distinguished by a blustering sort of courage, could be easily frightened—not for long; the lucidity of his reason enabled him to analyze a situation and extricate himself from threatening circumstances without undue inconvenience, but only after he had been for a moment thoroughly scared. Remembering this trait of his, together with his habit of twisting his legs about the legs of his chair when he was excited, I installed hypodermic needles in the arms and legs of a flowery chair so like those in Mr. Slamon's own parlor that I was sure he would sooner or later sit in it. In times of stress even a familiar-looking piece of furniture offers a kind of reassurance. I waited till Mr. Slamon sat in this chair, then turned on the

record by which the voice of the host told Mr. Slamon that he would be the next to die. Suddenly I switched off the light. Mr. Slamon started, made his habitual movement, and the needles shot a quantity of poison into his blood. I turned on the light, saw that he was dead, and proceeded with the record giving the host's comments.

"At Mr. Slamon's death Miss Inglesby, strange as it sounds, lost her head, something that had never happened before in all her brilliant career. However, it is easy to understand that the longer one represses one's natural reactions to trying circumstances the more likely one is to be overcome by a break of the dam in a moment of desperate strain. The events of the evening had considerably shaken Miss Inglesby; when Mr. Slamon died I saw she was near the breaking point and added a bit by pretending to go half mad myself and accusing her of having killed him. I recalled to her mind some of her well-known extra-legal maneuvers, and let the voice of the host chime in at the proper moment to wear out her self-control. She went mad for an instant and dashed at the outer door, which she had been told would electrocute anyone who touched it. Miss Inglesby, as I had known she would, committed suicide."

"This is horrible!" shuddered Jean.

"Why?" demanded Hank. "It is precisely what happened. Go on, Peter.

"Dr. Murray Chambers Reid announced with his peculiar complacency that he had found a way to baffle the host. Dr. Reid, I must admit, had already made several psychological deductions so close to the truth that they would have made me shiver had I not been confident that Dr. Reid's mind clung too closely to the long-smoothed channels of thought to swerve off into the unfamiliar course that would have led him to the ultimate solution of the puzzle.

"Dr. Reid said he had observed how all the deaths that had taken place had happened with some assistance given to the murderer by his victims, and that he therefore intended to stay where he was till morning. I had already planned the death of Dr. Reid, but that stupid speech of his pointed out the proper time. I turned off the lights and took a pair of target pistols from a recess behind the chair I was occupying, where I had hidden them. In the darkness, with a pistol in each hand, I pointed one at Dr. Reid and the other toward the window behind me, and I fired both at the same time.

"Both pistols were equipped with Maxim silencers. Both had long barrels that smothered the flash. One had an aluminum bullet with a light charge of powder. Synchronizing my touch, I had placed the muzzle of the pistol in my left hand just where the aluminum bullet would graze my temple, and go through the glass of the window behind me.

"Giving the pistols a polish with my handkerchief to take away fingerprints, I dropped them back into their hiding place and turned on the light. The effect, of course, was as if Dr. Reid had been struck by a bullet fired from outside the window. Dr. Reid, you observe, died as he had lived—sitting still."

He paused.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Jean.

Peter picked up the pen with a twitching hand. "Is that all?"

"I believe so. Yes, that is all. I have proved my genius against a novel touchstone, Peter. Do you——"

"Stop!" cried Peter with a sudden break of his endurance. "Stop—I'll be damned if I'll listen to another phrase of your horrid ravings. Sign this obscene document and have done."

Hank interrupted him with a cackle of dry laughter.

"You are in such a devastating hurry, Peter."

"Yes, I am! I want it over. Sign this confession, Hank!—before I run this foil through you." He stopped short, the pen and paper in his outstretched hands. Hank, like a leering mummy in his bandages, was rocking with uncontrollable and awful laughter.

"Sign it, you idiot? Of course I won't sign it. Did you think I would? Oh, you fool, you trusting fool—I swallowed a dab of talcum powder and you'll be dead in thirty seconds, with a confession in your own handwriting held in your hand."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

For an instant Peter stared, frozen by a swoop of horror. The room was swirling; Hank's awful grinning face and Jean's terrified eyes bleared as if seen through a pane of faulty glass. Suddenly he felt his right hand struck with a stinging blow; the pen clattered to the floor and Hank leaped to his feet with a howl of fury.

"Hold him, Peter!" Jean screamed out of the confusion, and with an almost mechanical response Peter flung himself upon Hank's strapped figure. For a moment they fought, rolling on the rug. Hank was struggling madly, with an astonishing force behind his bound body, and Peter was flushed and panting when at last he looked up, his knee on Hank's chest pinning him to the floor.

"Jean!" he cried. "Where are you?"

"Here," she answered, and came forward. He noticed for the first time her twitching hands and the dark rings of exhaustion under her eyes. "Are you all right, Peter?"

Hank turned his head on the floor.

"And are you all right, you damned little sneak?"

"Be quiet!" ordered Peter.

"Be quiet? Why should I? If that girl hadn't been too quick for us both you'd have been very quiet by now."

"Then it was the pen!" cried Jean exultantly.

"Peter," said Hank with an effort, "will you be good enough to take your knee out of my ribs?"

"I'll be damned if I will."

"I don't think he can hurt us," said Jean. "I really believe that was his last trick, or he wouldn't be so furious."

"What trick?" asked Peter. He frowned, realizing for the first time that more than thirty seconds had passed since he had written the confession and that he was still alive.

"The pen, Peter—you always bite the top of your pen when you're thinking hard."

"Yes, I know. I do it unconsciously. I always have. Lord—I didn't bite anything in this accursed house, did I?"

"You didn't," said Hank heavily, but with a touch of malicious sarcasm. "But you would have."

"I struck it out of your hand," said Jean. "You

were about to bite it. He had frightened you. You were puzzled. I didn't think—sort of flashed on me that that was what he had been doing all night, using habits like that."

"You astonishing girl," said Peter slowly.

"Yes," murmured Hank. "Astonishing. If Peter had bitten the pen he'd have shot enough prussic acid down his throat to have him completely out of our way now, Jean."

"And you would have killed me," said Jean with a shudder.

"Precisely. I'd have driven you hysterical without much trouble, and if you didn't dash at that death door the way Sylvia did I'd have gotten that foil between my knees somehow and cut off enough of this tape to let me throttle you. Then I'd have cut the rest and left in my topcoat. But you're a clever girl, Jean."

"Clever!" said Peter with a slow smile. "Do you know, Jean, you and I have saved each other's lives to-night."

She smiled in answer, then suddenly she turned back to Hank. "Why did you want to kill me, Hank?"

"No motive at all. That would have finished the mystery."

"My God," said Peter.

Jean took a step nearer Hank's prone figure.

"Hank," she said tensely, "let us out now."

"No."

"You won't?" exclaimed Peter. "Not even now?"

"No. I don't want you two going to police headquarters any sooner than I have to let you. Besides, it's rather amusing to be lying here, quite helpless with Peter holding me down, and knowing you are quite as helpless as I am."

Slowly Peter bent forward and took up the pen with which he had written Hank's confession.

"Hank," he said, "we will be rescued eventually. When we are, you will be hanged."

"Yes," said Hank.

"There is only one return we can make for your letting us leave this apartment before both Jean and I are reduced to hysteria. That is to let you bite the top of this pen."

Hank stirred slightly under Peter's knee. After a pause he answered.

"You will let me have it before you go?"

"When the door is open."

Hank considered. "It's a fair bargain," he said at length. "I don't want to be hanged. Trials

are too messy and last so long. Let me have it."

Peter shook his head.

"How do you turn off the electric current in the door?"

"There are two switches—one in the front room and one outside near the door. I used the one outside to turn off the current when Sylvia was killed. It's a tiny gray knob between two of the stones of the wall, just to the right of the door. Press the knob down."

"You'll have to do it, Hank."

"You still don't trust me. Put the pen in my hand and let me get out there."

"I'll do it," offered Jean suddenly. "I'll use the corner of a book—I won't touch the button. Wait a minute."

She ran out. Peter waited till she came back, still holding Hank immovable and keeping the poisoned pen out of his reach.

"I found it," said Jean, returning. "Is it really safe to leave now, Hank?"

"Yes. I swear it is safe. Give me the pen, Peter."

Peter rose slowly. He had the pen in his hand.

"Come open the door, Hank. Then I'll give it to you."

He half carried, half dragged Hank toward the outer door of the patio. Jean followed them. Hank stood at the threshold leaning against the wall, smiling a crooked smile. Jean looked out over the patio.

"It's morning," she said.

They looked up. A fan of gold clouds was unfolding above the roofs, and beyond it the sky was turning a clear peacock green. Peter and Jean looked back at each other; Hank's eyes rested on the patio and its wreck of death.

"Open the door, Hank," said Peter.

"I beg your pardon. I was getting reminiscent."

Supported by Peter, he reached for the knob. His hands, strapped at the wrists, grasped and turned it. The door swung open. Jean stepped out. As Peter followed her his hold on the pen loosened and Hank grasped it. Over the threshold they saw the hall and the stairs leading down to the elevator. It seemed strange that nothing had changed there since they had climbed the stairs.

Looking back, they saw Hank leaning against the wall. He smiled oddly at them, and as they looked, he bent his head toward his hands. Deliberately he bit the top of the fountain pen and they saw him swallow. The door closed.

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THE DAY OF UNITING

By

Edgar Wallace

CHAPTER ONE

To Jimmy Blake, mathematics were as the Greek of Socrates to the unlearned senator. As for the calculii, they would have filled him with awe and wonder, if he had had any idea of their functions.

When, in the days of his extreme youth, Jimmy had been asked to prove that a circle was equal in area to a triangle whose base was equal to the circumference, and whose height was equal to the radius of the circle, Jimmy magnanimously accepted his master's word that it was so, and passed on to something more human. Though by some extraordinary means he scraped through school with a certificate and emerged from Oxford with a sort of degree, his mathematical paper would have caused Archimedes to turn in his grave.

It was his fate to live in the closest contact with the scientific mind. Jimmy Blake a rich man and by some accounted eccentric, though the beginning and end of his eccentricity were to be found in his dislike for work and his choice of Blackheath as a desirable residential quarter. He had inherited from his father a beautiful old Georgian house, facing the Heath, and which an enterprising auctioneer would have truthfully described as "standing in extensive and park-like grounds."

Such an agent might have gone on to rhapsodize over the old world gardens of Blake's Priory, the comfort of the accommodation, the Adams' decorations; and when he had exhausted its æsthetic and sylvan charms, his utilitarian mind would probably have descended to such mundane advantages as the central heating, electric installation and the character of the soil on which it stood.

Within these grounds there had once been a veritable priory. At some period of the seventeenth century when Greenwich and Blackheath were fashionable rendezvous for the élite and fashion of Elizabeth's court and when the stately palace by the river saw Raleigh and Leicester, and the grand gentlemen and dames of society strolling on the grassy slopes of the Royal Park, a Major

Blake had acquired the property and had erected a pleasure house for himself and his friends. The house no longer existed, but the gardens he had planned still sent forth their ancient fragrance.

To Jimmy the Prior was home, and, though he maintained a modest flat at the back of Park Lane, he spent very little of his time there. The glories of Elizabeth's Greenwich had departed definitely and completely and were one with the Court of Jamshid. Aged pensioners shuffled along the marble halls where the bucks of the Virgin had pranced and prinked, and a heavy-footed Drake had stalked with the news of victories on the Spanish Main. Incidentally, Jimmy came from a long line of adventurers and could trace his descent from an uncle of the great Blake.

"It is a standing wonder to me, Jimmy," said Van Roon one night, "why a man like you, with the blood of filibusters in your veins, should be content to loaf through life behind the steering wheel of a Rolls, having no other objective than the satisfaction of your unscientific curiosity."

"No curiosity is unscientific," said Jimmy lazily. "I'm surprised at you, Jerry! Didn't Huxley or one of those Johnnies say——"

Van Roon groaned. His was the scientific mind,

against which Jimmy's intelligence was for ever rubbing. Gerald Van Roon was Jimmy's cousin, a brilliant genius to whom the world was a great laboratory, alternating with a small bedroom, with the furnishings of which he had never become acquainted, because he had not remained in the room long enough.

A tall, angular man with large bony hands, a big bulging forehead, two small deep-set eyes which even his immense and powerful spectacles did not magnify, Gerald Van Roon seemed the least suitable of companions for a man of Jimmy's tastes. He was exact, precise, orderly, had no human interests and absolutely no tastes in common with his happy-go-lucky cousin. And yet to the surprise of all who knew them, they lived together in the greatest harmony. Gerald amused Jimmy in one way and impressed him in another. The man's high principles, his almost fanatical passion for the truth, which is after all the basic layer of the scientific mind, his child-like innocence in all worldly matters, his contempt for commerce and the rewards which commercial success brings, his extraordinary idealism—all these were very endearing qualities, which appealed strongly to the younger man.

"You're a funny devil," said Jimmy, throwing his serviette in a heap on the table. (Gerald Van Roon rolled his precisely and fitted the napkin ring exactly over the center of the roll.) "I suppose you're going to that stink-shop of yours?"

"I'm going to the laboratory," said Gerald with a faint smile.

"Good Lord!" said Jimmy, shaking his head in wonder. "On a gorgeous day like this! Come with me to the sea, Jerry. I've got the old roller at the door, and in an hour and a half we'll be on the Sussex Downs, sniffing the beautiful ozone and watching the baa-lambs frisk and gambol."

"Come to my lab., and I'll make you some ozone in two seconds," said Gerald, getting up from the table and fumbling for his pipe.

Jimmy groaned. His companion was at the door when he turned, his hand upon the handle.

"Jimmy, would you like to meet the Prime Minister?" he asked.

"Good Lord, no," said Jimmy astonished. "Why should I want to meet the Prime Minister. I loathe his politics and I thought the speech he made the other day about the tyranny of the farmers was in shocking bad taste."

Gerald frowned.

"Oh, did he make a speech?" he asked in a vague, surprised tone, as though he had heard of some abnormality on the part of the Prime Minister of England. "I never read speeches, and of course it really doesn't matter what politicians say —they mean nothing."

"Why do you want me to meet the Prime Minister?"

"I don't really want you to meet him," said Gerald, "but I thought you would enjoy the experience. Chapelle is very strong for science and he is really an excellent mathematician."

"I gathered that from his last budget," said Jimmy grimly, for the Prime Minister was also Chancellor of the Exchequer.

He saw the puzzled look on Van Roon's face.

"A budget," he explained politely, is an apology made by a responsible minister in the House of Commons for the robberies he intends to commit in the ensuing year. But what about his mathematical qualities? I have no wish to meet mathematicians. Don't you think the scientific atmosphere in which I live is sufficiently thick without introducing a new brand of fog?"

"It doesn't matter," said Gerald, opening the

door. "Only he's giving a luncheon to a few interesting people."

"Including yourself?"

"Including myself," said Gerald gravely. "It is a luncheon party to meet Maggerson. He's coming back from America, but I suppose you know that?"

"Maggerson?" said Jimmy. "Who is Maggerson?"

If an actor were asked, "Who was Henry Irving?" or a doctor, "Who was Lister?" the questions would produce exactly the same tragic look of incredulity as dawned upon the ungainly face of Gerald Van Roon.

"Who is Maggerson?" he repeated. "You're joking, Jimmy."

"I'm not," said Jimmy stoutly.

"Of course you are."

"Who is Maggerson?" demanded Jimmy again, and Gerald walked slowly back into the room and stared down at the unabashed young man.

"You'll ask who Leibnitz was next," he said.

"Oh, I know all about him," said Jimmy confidently. "He was a German socialist who was executed——"

"Leibnitz," interrupted the other severely, "was the greatest mathematician Germany has produced. He was a contemporary of Newton, and together they produced the calculus."

"Good luck to 'em," said Jimmy. "And when they produced it, what did they do with it? Anyway, what is a calculus? Isn't that a sort of multiplication table?"

Here Archimedes must have positively revolved.

Then Jimmy heard about Maggerson and the calculus he had discovered, or invented, or adopted—he was not certain which. It was the calculus which was accepted by all authorities and which had superseded Leibnitz and Newton's and Lagrange's, and was known as "Maggerson's Calculus of Variation."

"Is it a book?" asked Jimmy at last, "because, dear old thing, I'll buy it and read it up. I should hate to meet Mr. Maggerson and not be able to tell him how his little story ends."

PERIL

By

Sydney Horler

CHAPTER ONE

ON THE EMBANKMENT

Boom!

Big Ben struck one o'clock. The woman occupying the other end of the seat awoke with a start.

"Oh, Gawd!" she whined, "I thought as 'ow I was in stir again, s'elp me if I didn't!" She waited, pulling her filthy rags closer round her, for the unwilling listener to reply. As he kept silent, she continued in a tone of contempt: " 'Igh an' mighty, ain't you? That's one thing about stir: it brings you all down to one common thermometer. No airs *there!*"

Still there was silence, and the woman, disgusted, turned her back and composed herself again to such sleep as was possible.

Lifting his head from his hands, Jimmy Hannay rose. Sleep was impossible. For one thing, he was shiveringly cold, and for another, he was too hungry. A third reason why he preferred to walk rather than stay on the seat, was the unwelcome proximity of the hag who had slouched up half an hour before and after peering inquisitively at him, had settled herself in the other corner of the seat. By every sign she was a hardened outcast; a human pariah; and he had not been long enough on the border-line of actual want to become reconciled to such a companion.

It was dry, but bitterly cold. A fine night for the derelicts of London, among whom he must now number himself. As he started to walk quickly towards Westminster, he could see them crouched beneath the Embankment wall, huddled on the seats, lurking in the arches of Hungerford Bridge —miserable wretches to whom Death, he should have imagined a few days before, would have come as a welcome friend.

This was his second night without a bed, and within that short, if tragic, space of time he had learned that even to the most miserable of God's creatures the desire to live clings with astonishing tenacity. These men and women might be riddled

with disease, they might be starved, cold and foot-sore, and yet not one of the few with whom he had been forced to exchange words, had been utterly despairing. One man, after confessing to having been, a few years before, a Master in a famous Public School, had put it this way: "Even here on the Embankment, nothing is so bad but what it might be worse. And who knows what may not turn up? A millionaire with a craze for social amelioration and helping the submerged, may take it into his head to drive along here one night and give every one of us a helping hand. Yes, my young friend, such a miracle has been known to happen. But just one word of warning: if you ever want to rise clear of the morass, keep away from drink. Whiskey has brought me to this. Yes . . ." and, muttering to himself, the speaker had settled himself to try to forget in the blessed oblivion of sleep.

This conversation had taken place the night before. Hannay had hoped that it would be the last time he would be forced to spend the sleeping hours in this tragic thoroughfare of the damned. But his quest for work—any kind of work—had proved as hopeless the following day as during the last four cursed weeks. Those to whom he had

applied for a job (he had come down to pleading to be allowed to do any kind of manual labour) had looked askance and had mostly turned away without asking him a single question. The swine!

Now he could see the Houses of Parliament and the Abbey rising majestically into the heavens: there on the right was Scotland Yard. He cursed it all—Parliament, because the men who sat there making their damnably silly laws continued to ignore the like of him, and Scotland Yard because if he dared to commit a crime they would not take into consideration the fact that he was almost sick through want of food, and that he was shuddering now with the cold because his overcoat had long since been pawned.

"An officer and a gentleman." That, in the grimly ironic phrase, had been what he was styled only a few years back. And now—God! what was he? A case, if his sense of desolation increased, for suicide—nothing more. The murmur of the dark river, flowing so close, sounded like siren-music: it seemed to whisper an invitation to him.

Not that—not yet, at any rate. What was it that sodden ex-schoolmaster had said the night before?

One never knew what would happen. One night

a millionaire might come driving along the Embankment——

"I say."

Someone had spoken—called him. He turned quickly. There at the kerb, not half a dozen yards away, was a man leaning from the window of a long, lean monster of a motor-car. Yet he had not heard the thing approach. But one glance at the engine, and he was able to appreciate the reason: this car was a Rolls.

He could scarcely realise that the man had addressed *him*. What could he want except to enquire the way; and the chauffeur surely ought to know his London.

"I say," called the man again; "I want to speak to you."

Although the voice had the snap of authority, it was not unkindly. The wild supposition came to Hannay that the miracle which the soused exschoolmaster had referred to the previous evening, had happened: this must be a millionaire interested in social problems.

He stepped forward. Yet his eagerness, curiously enough, was not due to thought of self. If his supposition was correct, such a man ought not to be kept waiting.

"Were you addressing me?" He should have added "sir," he supposed, but somehow calling any man "sir," apart from the King or the Prince of Wales—and he had met both while serving in France—savoured too much of a cringing servility. The word was difficult to utter, and he left it alone.

"Yes. You won't think me too inquisitive if I ask you why you are not wearing an overcoat on a bitter night like this?"

Hannay gave a ghost of a smile.

"That's easily enough answered," he said; "I am not wearing an overcoat for the simple, but adequate, reason that I no longer possess one. My overcoat was pawned in a side-street off Holborn three days ago."

He made to move on. The glimpse he had of the luxurious interior of the car—the roomy seats upholstered in biscuit-coloured Bedford cord, the cigarette box, the rack for the newspapers—above all, the flowers in the slim silver vase—was too vivid a reminder of the gulf which stretched between him and the man to whom he was speaking. There could be no bridge between them—and, the devil! he didn't intend there should be; he wasn't going to have this millionaire's pity!

The man was speaking again.

"Very presumptuous of me to have stopped the car, perhaps, old chap—but, dash it, I want to help you."

"Help me!" So unexpected were the words that he repeated them stupidly like a child endeavouring to master a new and difficult lesson. Then: "Why?" he asked; "and who are you?"

"My name scarcely matters, and if I tell it you, as I'm quite willing to do, it won't convey anything. But it's Dorman."

"And do you make a practice, Mr. Dorman, of doing the decent to every down-and-out. If so, I should think you were kept pretty busy."

The clean-shaven face of the prospective benefactor wrinkled itself into a smile.

"Well, no," the other confessed, "and I don't mind admitting it wanted some courage to speak to you a moment ago. But the thought came as I drove along the Embankment after coming from a dinner at the Savoy how terribly unfair life was to a great many people. Here was I, for instance, in a £3,000 motor-car, warm and snug, with a good dinner inside me and excellent clothes on my back —and there, only a few yards away, were creatures who couldn't even afford a few coppers to get a night's shelter in some common lodging-house.

The injustice of it compelled me to speak to you."

"Why me?" The man spoke earnestly and appeared deeply sincere, but Hannay's experience of Life during the past two years—ever since, in fact, he had taken off his uniform as an infantry officer and become a civilian—had taught him that the surface of things is too often cruelly deceptive. Mr. Dorman possibly was all he was trying to picture himself to be, but two years' incessant fight with the world, and waging a losing battle all the time, leaves little room for belief in human nature. Hope, faith and charity are crushed out. Hannay had found that the Cheeryble brothers might read admirably in fiction, but they did not exist in real life.

The man in the car nodded.

"That is a fair, as well as a sensible question. I selected you because you looked, in spite of your —excuse me—shabby clothes, a gentleman."

"I was supposed to be one once," was the comment, spoken with an unbelievable bitterness; " 'an officer and a gentleman'—good God!"

THE MONSTER OF GRAMMONT

By
George Goodchild

CHAPTER ONE

GHOSTS

The bronzed, healthy-looking driver of the Bentley car put his foot harder on the accelerator pedal, and averted his head to hear the crackle of the exhaust as the sleek automobile sped along the undulating tree-lined Route Nationale. For the past three hours that white, arrow-like road had held his eyes, and he was "killing" it as fast as safety would permit, for main routes at the best were inclined to be monotonous.

While the speedometer needle wavered between the sixties and seventies, his travelling companion was endeavouring to find their exact position on a large-scale French road map, a feat of consider-

able difficulty for which the execrable road surface was largely responsible.

"Steady, old man!" he said, as the wheels struck a deep cassis, causing a jarring of springs and a slight dither in the steering. "This isn't Brooklands."

"It's about as unlovely. We'll cut off at the next turning."

Speed was reduced as bade *pavé* was encountered on the outskirts of a straggling village. It was exactly like a dozen others passed through that morning—two rows of tall, bare houses, with lime-washed walls and green shutters, a café, a comestibile, and a pump surrounded by ample troughs, at which a few women were engaged in washing clothes. At the far end were two garages, each provided with a red petrol-pump bearing the familiar word "*Essence*," the price in the one case being ten francs, and in the other ten francs fifty centimes, for precisely the same brand of fuel.

"Wonderful folk!" said the driver.

The car almost leaped the last ten yards of appalling *pavé*, and seemed to purr with satisfaction as the tyres found a better surface. On either hand sunlit fields stretched away to a hazy horizon, and here and there blue-bloused peasants were making

the first hay. But periodically war-scars came to view, for it was the summer of 1920, and but a bare two years since the Germans made their last retreat that was to end five years of unmitigated horror.

The elder man folded up his map and placed it beside him. He was of smaller build than his young companion, and, judging from his face, of a more complaisant temperament. But, like the driver, he bore all the signs of abundant health and vitality. The pair had brought the car across the Channel a few days before, with the object of making a month's tour of north and mid-France. No route had been laid down, and more often than not they slept in towns that they had no intention of visiting.

"Ralph!"

The driver averted his head.

"Turn left beyond the bridge. There's a road that appears to go right through the forest."

The car slowed down, and the acute bend was taken. Soon it was evident that the change of direction was justified. The first blush of summer lay over everything, and the dust-laden trees of the Route Nationale gave place to the rich, rain-washed hues of early June. The serpentine road

became a joy, for it held surprises at every bend and pleaded for less speed and more appreciation.

Ralph Wallace banished his tense expression, and displayed his strong, white teeth in a smile. Speed-hog as he was, he was not so abandoned as not to be able to appreciate the natural joys of the quiet and refulgent by-ways. Lately he had had a surfeit of speed—a luxury that the straight roads of France offer to young "bloods" who own a ninety-miles-an-hour car.

"Give me a cigarette, Connie," he begged.

Julian Conrad, the passenger, handed over the required article and lighted it in Wallace's mouth, for the Bentley was now ambling along at a cycle pace. As Conrad turned his head one might have noticed a thin, straight scar extending from the corner of the left eye to the edge of the firm mouth. But the surgeon had made a neat job of it, and the sun had browned his skin to such an extent that this memento of the war could only be seen at close range.

The delightful road began to ascend, and on the right of it the land slipped away gradually, forming a verdant valley in which were scattered a few farms. Here and there were cattle, but in small numbers. It was chickens that predominated.

Every farm seemed to thrive on poultry, and what cattle there were appeared to be thin and out of condition. After half an hour's pleasant amble the road reached the summit of the long incline. A gap in the immediate timber brought to view one of the pleasantest vistas yet encountered. A mile or so in the distance was a beautiful château—a dream of architectural beauty, gleaming white amid the many shades of green, built on the edge of a great chasm.

"Stop a moment," said Conrad, laying his hand on that of his companion. "By Jove, I had no idea we were in this district."

"What district?"

"The Marne. I know that place quite well—I ought to."

"You mean the château?"

"Yes—the Château Grammont. I must have mentioned it to you at some time or other."

"You may have, but I have the rottenest memory for names."

The eyes of Conrad were filled with a new light. A short time ago he had been dreaming lazily—drinking in the natural beauties of the country in subconscious fashion. Now into his mind had come something stirring—vital. The lips became

compressed for a few seconds. Then they opened again, and a little sigh escaped him, for the memories that were revived by the fair sight before him were very mixed. Wallace looked at him interrogatively.

"It's just the same as it was when I saw it—four years ago. Dropping on it like this, in June sunlight, with the birds singing, stirs one a bit."

"You know it?"

"Yes. I spent what I think was the happiest month of my life there."

"Ah, the war?"

"Yes—the war. We had been knocked to pieces twenty miles farther north. Jove, that was a ruddy business. I was laid out at the end of it. No wound of any sort—just sheer fatigue. I was on the way to an absolute breakdown when they sent me down for a rest. I had no idea I was going to a place like that. There was a score or so of us in all—slight wounds and knock-outs. We each had a month in which to recuperate—and we did. It was quite a voluntary business. The owner of the château was a Monsieur Fallières. I think he had a title, but at any rate he never used it. He had been rendered unfit for further service in the earlier campaign, and gave up half his wonderful

home to the cause. Everything was gratis and *ad lib.* We played tennis, bowls, badminton, rode fine horses in the Forêt de Grammont— It was all done with such grace, too. We were just members of a house-party, and madame and her daughters were as charming as if we had known them for half a century."

"They still lived there?"

"Yes. There were two little girls of seven and eight, and another, named Yolande, who I think was sixteen. She was at school somewhere on the coast, but was home on holiday at that period. We used to pet her a lot. I hope we didn't spoil her."

"I expect you did—if she was pretty."

"She was pretty enough—not the conventional prettiness, either. I often thought I would like to paint her. Well, thank God their fine old home was saved to them."

"Did the line never reach as far as that?"

"Later I believe; but all the pressure was taken off this sector. I think I read that the Germans held the château for some months, and then the line was pushed back. You were lucky to have missed that bloody business, Ralph."

"You are making me wonder whether I was lucky," said Wallace, with a laugh. "Another six

months and I should have had a taste of it. I remember I nearly wept with regret when the Armistice found me doing foot-drill and 'physical jerks' on Salisbury Plain."

"No book that will ever be written can convey to you half the misery, horror, and suffering. These little diversions gain all their beauty by comparison with the background against which they stand. Well, here we are again in God's peace and sunshine. Men must be mad ever to give them up."

"I've often told you you have missed your vocation in life, Conrad," said Wallace. "You ought to have entered the Church. Of course, I quite agree with you, but the fact is that most young men feel they ought to be allowed to act like savages before they adopt the only possible point of view towards legalised murder. I'm getting a bit hungry, aren't you?"

"I'm past that stage. I remember there is a fair-sized town about twenty kilometres farther on. I'll consult the map. This road ought to lead somewhere."

THE HOUSE OF TERROR

By

Edward Woodward

CHAPTER ONE

THE MAN IN THE MIST

I

Dr. Cuthbery Merrivale bustled his jingling flivver up the last sharp rise of the Cleeson Moor road, and then, having reached level ground, came to a halt to let the engine cool off, and to light his pipe.

On every hand the wide space of the Yorkshire Moors lay shrouded in one of those sudden Autumn mists, which turn every material thing into an oddly shaped phantom, and muffle and warp ordinary sounds until they glide to the ear with eerie portent. When one of these "frets" comes

across, it fills the stranger with panic, he loses direction, sight, sense and hearing. He plunges around and gets lost with a sprained ankle, broken leg or worse. Only for those who know the moors and who travel by instinct, is it safe to move.

Dr. Merrivale knew the moors. With the exception of his hospital-walking period, he had lived on them all his life; and so, "frets" having no fear for him, he was on the point of starting off again, when the mist on the right of his radiator suddenly blackened, and the lean form of a man appeared. He was sunburned and hawk-like, with arresting grey eyes, and he bore heavily on a thick stick.

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed Merrivale, his blue eyes wide with his double-lens spectacles. "You gave me quite a start!"

The stranger smiled at the cherubic-faced little doctor.

"Sorry," he said apologetically. "But could you tell me where the devil I am?"

Dr. Merrivale ran considering eyes over the man from the mist; noted the rough tweed clothes, the pulled-down felt hat and the rucksack on the spare, wide shoulders.

"I can," he said in his chirpy voice. "You are at the top of Cleeson Moor; but even an artist can't

appreciate the view on a day like this. You are two miles south-west of the village of Cleeson, and if you are going that way, jump in and I'll give you a lift. I'm the village saw-bones—you are an artist, aren't you?"

"Generous and trusting of you," said the stranger, and smiled only with his eyes as he climbed in beside the doctor. "Yes, I'm a painter on a walking tour for a holiday, and when this beastly mist came down I tramped around in circles for a bit, and then trod in a rabbit hole and wrenched my ankle."

"Hard luck," said Merrivale, peering ahead. "I'll have a look at it if you like, when I get you to my confessional. . . ."

"Confessional?"

"Consulting room . . . Same thing . . . Only bodily pain generally makes the sinners tell us *everything*. The priest, as a rule, only gets half the facts. Ha-ha-ha; You'd be surprised! Come far?"

The stranger was regarding Merrivale with an oblique smile.

"Very far," he said. "From the other end of the earth now, from hell originally. . . ."

Merrivale nearly hit the bank.

"God bless my soul!" he exclaimed, and then with a glimmer of his spectacles, "Find this chill mist a bit of a change, eh? What? Oh, I bet you do. Name not Beelzebub, I suppose? Ha-ha-ha! What?"

"My name is Fenchurch. George Fenchurch, and yours?"

"Cuthbery Merrivale, M.B., M.R.C.S., L.R.C.P., and damme, I can doctor a horse or heifer as well as a human."

"You and the parson and the squire are the rulers of the village, I suppose," smiled Fenchurch. "You look after the bodies, the parson cures the souls, and the squire—What does your squire do?"

Again Merrivale was conscious of his passenger's oblique glance, and of the intensity of his grey eyes.

"So you've heard," he said. "Even in hell?"

"Heard what?"

The question came swiftly, disarming of subterfuge.

"That our Rupert Dykeminster is an odd fish."

Fenchurch was silent for a space, then:

"I've *heard* he's a damned disagreeable swine," he said. "That he is unloved in life and would be unmourned in death. Is that true?"

Merrivale pursed his lips for a second.

"I'm afraid it is," he answered. "He came to Cleeson about twenty years ago from abroad somewhere, I believe; inherited the Manor from his brother Joseph, and became hated at once, by erecting a six-foot bull-fence round the park in place of the old stone wall, which was much honoured in the breach. Ha-ha. . . . The lads used the park as a playground in old Joe's time. . . ."

"Does Rupert Dykeminster live alone?" asked Fenchurch. "Is his wife alive?"

"He's a widower, his wife, poor soul, died about a year after they came here. Seemed to have some terrible grief. . . . Died of as near a broken heart as is physically possible . . . and since then Dykeminster has lived alone save for a dwarf serving man. Horrible little beast. . . . Gives me the creeps. Dykeminster never comes outside the park gates, and has a brace of man-eating wolfhounds to keep everyone out of the park."

"Sounds a cheery ménage," muttered Fenchurch, as though to himself. "Have you ever heard whether he had any children?"

"Good God!" gasped Merrivale. "You can't associate children with a monster like Dykeminster. . . . But there *was* a son, died abroad I under-

stood from Mrs. Dykeminster, before she passed on to her happy release. She told me an ugly yarn about it; but I think she was distraught. Must have been suffering from delusions. . . . Anyway, I can't tell it to you. . . ."

"I know it," said Fenchurch, and again Merrivale nearly went off the road.

"You know it?"

"Yes. But let's talk about something clean and pleasant."

Threading the outskirts of the village, Merrivale was silent, and not until he had pulled up outside a stone-pillared gateway did he speak again.

"Here's the slaughter-house," he said. "Hop out and I'll have your foot off in a jiffy."

Ten minutes later Dr. Merrivale pushed his spectacles on to his forehead, and indicated that the examination of the foot was completed.

"Horse-embrocation and twenty-four hours' rest will put that right," he said. "You'll have to pause for that time in your walking tour."

"Thanks," said Fenchurch. "I'd intended stopping a while in this village. I suppose there's an inn?"

"One of the best in Yorkshire," beamed Merrivale. "Old Martuke of the Dykeminster Arms will

welcome you with delight at this time of the year."

"Then I shall be happy," smiled Fenchurch. "I plan to paint some of the older parts of the Manor, and some of the giant trees in the park."

"The devil you do," gurgled Merrivale. "Then your plans are going to gang agley, young man. You won't get your nose inside the park gates. Dykeminster's wolf-hounds will see to that."

A secretive smile passed over Fenchurch's face.

"I'll manage it somehow; when a man has lived with devils he's not afraid of dogs."

He finished putting on his brogue, and then stood up whilst Merrivale watched him with questioning eyes.

"You're pretty sure of yourself, aren't you?" asked the doctor.

"Very," grinned Fenchurch, and with a "Thanks so much, I'll let myself out," departed.

For a second or so Merrivale stood looking through the window at the swirling mist and listening to the regular tap and drag of the departing Fenchurch. He had gone so quickly that the doctor had the strange impression that he hadn't been there at all.

He shook himself.

"Nice sort of chap," he mused. "But looked as

though he'd got a nasty secret at nurse. Funny he should have heard about Dykeminster. Lord! There'll be some feathers flying if he and old Rupert meet in the park."

As for Fenchurch, having arranged for a room at the inn, he ordered a sound meal, and then sluiced down with the satisfied air of a man who has completed the first lap of a long journey.

"So this was Cleeson, was it?" he mused over the subsequent meal. "This was the hover of the Dykeminsters; this was the lair of Rupert of that ilk. Well, he was here at last. It had taken him a devilish long time to find it, and before he left, he would make the journey worth while. Things were going to happen!"

He chuckled grimly as he chewed; and old Martuke hovering round his guest, curious, and eager to find out the why and wherefore of this late Autumn visit, shuddered at the rawness of the laugh.

"Chilly night, sir," he said, invitingly.

"Yes," said Fenchurch. "But the mist has cleared, I see."

"Clearing, sir," corrected Martuke. "Clearing for frost, that's what it's doing. Stars are coming out very bright. It will be a nice night."

THE HARDWAY DIAMONDS MYSTERY

By

MILES BURTON

CHAPTER ONE

ALTHOUGH the fog was so thick that from the pavement one could scarcely see the lights of the vehicles in the roadway, Mr. Thomas Herridge, known to his intimates as Pussy, hurried confidently on his way, avoiding collisions with a peculiar lithe dexterity. He crossed Oxford Street, and was at once swallowed up in the deep yellow murk which filled the gaps between the houses like the depths of some turbid sea. Here, foot passengers were much less frequent, but, curiously enough, instead of quickening his pace, Mr. Herridge slackened it.

And yet, perhaps, this was natural enough. Even the most experienced Londoner might have

been excused for losing his bearings. Once away from the railings which guarded the area steps, one was lost, as if in some uncharted land. The taxi-drivers had long ago given up their hopeless attempts to find their way, and the side streets were practically deserted. At intervals a dim halo would loom out of the fog, marking the position of a lamp-post. Beyond this the wayfarer had no beacon by which to guide his uncertain footsteps.

But it was not any doubt of his whereabouts that caused Mr. Herridge to modify his haste. He seemed to be in possession of a sixth sense, which told him unfailingly of his locality. He was, in fact, in Woodbridge Square, surrounded by tall and dignified houses, from behind whose closely curtained windows came no single gleam of light. Mr. Herridge walked slowly round the Square twice, every sense on the alert. He saw for a fleeting moment the lantern of a policeman on beat, he heard the steps of one or two cautious pedestrians feeling their way along the railings; now and then a faint whiff of cooking reached his nose through an area window. And, at last, apparently satisfied, he paused beneath a lamp-post to consult a neat silver watch, which he carried on his wrist. It was half-past eight.

For an instant he stood tense and listening. The fog was like a curtain round him, through which an indistinct roar came to him in muffled waves of sound. But his sharp ears could detect no footsteps in his vicinity, and with a smile of satisfaction he started to walk again, counting his steps carefully. Thirty yards from the lamp-post he crossed the pavement with outstretched hands, until he felt the masonry of a pillar. One more tense pause, and then, with incredible agility and swiftness, he swarmed up the pillar into the darkness.

But fog and darkness had no terrors for Mr. Herridge. Reaching the top of the pillar, he flung out an arm and felt for the edge of the projecting coping. Grasping this, he swung himself up, and in a couple of seconds found himself on the balcony above the porch of Lord Hardway's town house.

His first action on reaching the balcony was unexpected. From the pockets of his raincoat he produced a pair of light gymnasium shoes. Then, swiftly unlacing his boots, he drew them off and slipped on the shoes. Finally he divested himself of his coat, and laid this and the boots carefully in one corner of the balcony.

Peer as he would, he could find no gap through

which he could see anything of the room within. But his experience told him that no curtains shaded a window so completely as to hide every glimmer of a lighted room. The window was that of a drawing-room, as he knew from the result of much careful study of the house. The time, and the fact that the drawing-room was apparently unlighted, made it practically certain that Lord and Lady Hardway were at dinner. Again Mr. Herridge smiled, and, with a preparatory gesture, rubbed his gloved hands against his thighs.

He stepped back a couple of paces, and suddenly leapt into the air, towards the stone wall of the house. For an instant his fingers sought frantically for some support, but failed to find it.

Without a sound he alighted once more upon the balcony. He moved a couple of feet farther to the left, and leapt again. This time his fingers found a ledge, and curled round it like steel clamps. With a swift movement he raised himself until one foot was on the ledge. A second's groping with outstretched arm, and he found the sill of the window above him. Very cautiously he straightened himself until his feet were on the ledge, and his hands upon the window sill.

He had now no fears of being observed from the

Square. The fog was far too thick for the most powerful lamp to reveal him at such a height from the ground. But it would not do to be too precipitate. There were servants in the house, and it was necessary for him to discover what he could of their movements. So, absolutely motionless, he remained where he was, apparently perfectly at ease in his precarious position.

Suddenly a bright streak of light split the dark outline of the window vertically in half. The curtains were not fully drawn, half an inch separated them. Through the slit thus caused he could see every detail of the room, and the figure of the maid who had just entered it and switched on the light. She bustled about for a few minutes, turning back the cover of the bed, laying out night-clothes, tidying up the dressing-table. Then, with a parting glance round the room, she disappeared, switching off the light behind her.

Mr. Herridge waited for a couple of minutes, in case she should have forgotten anything. Then, having one hand on the sill, with the other he applied a small polished steel instrument to the hasp of the window. There was a faint click, and very cautiously he raised the window sash until there was enough room for his body to pass. He dived

in head first, alighting noiselessly on his hands. Here he remained, with his ear against the floor. The only footsteps which he could hear were those of the maid, and these were some distance away along the corridor. He drew himself to his feet, produced an electric torch and a bunch of curious-looking keys, and glided across the room to the head of the bed.

The safe had been cunningly hidden in the paneling of the room, but Mr. Herridge had no difficulty in finding it. He fingered a boss on the paneling, which under his touch, slid aside, revealing an orifice beneath. Into this he inserted one of his keys, only to withdraw it and try another. At the third attempt the lock yielded, and a portion of the paneling swung back, revealing a small jewel safe, steel lined. Into this he inserted his hand, and withdrew a massive leather case. A glance inside it revealed that the necklace was in its place. With a swift movement Mr. Herridge concealed the case about his person. He relocked the safe, and left the room by the way he had come, shutting the window behind him. His ingenious instrument was incapable of closing the hasp; this evidence of his entry he was forced to leave behind him. He reached the balcony, put on his boots and coat,

and lowered himself to the pavement once more. Then, quietly and without hurry, he began to walk towards the corner of the Square.

He had been only just in time. The fog was beginning to lift, with that amazing rapidity which characterizes London fogs. Already it was appreciably thinner; the curb was visible from the railings, the lamps illuminated an ever-growing circle of mist. Mr. Herridge congratulated himself upon having chosen his moment so well. It did not matter to him now how soon the fog lifted. In fact, it would help him. There would be more people in the streets and it would be easier for him to pursue his way unobserved.

When he was about fifty yards from Lord Hardway's house he began unostentatiously to quicken his steps. A car was coming up behind him, moving scarcely faster than he was himself, its driver obviously guiding himself by the line of the curb. This was a nuisance. It was just possible that the driver might notice him sufficiently to give a rough description if questioned subsequently. The theft was pretty sure to be discovered before very long, and Mr. Herridge was not particularly anxious to be seen just then in Woodbridge Square. He noticed with satisfaction that the effect of quickening

his steps was that the car did not gain upon him.

Having reached the corner of the Square, Mr. Herridge turned sharply into Deben Street. And, as he did so, for the first time he felt a sudden sickening conviction that he was being followed. He could hear or see nothing, but his extraordinarily sharp perception told him that somewhere in the fog was another form, as silent as himself. He checked himself, and cowered back against the railings, trying to pierce the darkness. As he did so a dark shadow loomed suddenly into the circle of light cast by the lamp at the corner.

Mr. Herridge knew that his only chance of escaping observation lay in remaining motionless, and trusting to the shadow passing him by. But a sudden and unreasonable panic took possession of him. The shadow materialized into the figure of a man, his height and bulk magnified by the fog. And when this menacing figure turned the corner and came straight towards him, Mr. Herridge lost his head and made a bolt for it down Deben Street. But it was too late, a hand like iron fell upon his shoulder, almost knocking him to the ground. And as he staggered, his arms were seized, he was swung round like a baby, and a pair of handcuffs snapped over his wrists.

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